

Carrier Wars



Christopher Nuttall

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Christopher G. Nuttall

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Carrier Wars Blurp

The USS *George Washington* and the French aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle* were engaged in a joint mission when they were swept up by an unknown power and swept across the timelines to a different reality – where the American Revolution failed and the British Empire still exists...

But the Empire is at war with the other two powers, the French and the Russians. Even as the crew of the *George Washington* attempt to adjust to the strange world that never held a United States of America, the French crew see an opportunity to strike a blow for France...by using their advanced ship to spearhead a powerful attack on the British Empire. All of the sudden, the Americans have to decide which side they're on...before a peaceful world is destroyed by modern war.

Dear Reader

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Christopher Nuttall, Kota Kinabalu, 2012

Prologue

Ever since the Civil War, when the British Isles had nearly torn themselves apart through epidemic fighting between the Cavaliers and Roundheads, the nation of Great Britain had been governed from the small complex called Ten Downing Street. It was not as simple as it looked – inside, it was one complex – but it was the centre of an empire that covered nearly a third of the world – and ruled the waves.

Most of the time, the Prime Minister reminded himself. The Honourable Lord Harriman Grey, Prime Minister of Great Britain, watched as the rain sleeted down from the grey sky, pouring down over London. The handful of patrolling fighters over the capital of the United Empire had been withdrawn; they couldn't fly in this weather and nor could the handful of bombers possessed by the Bourbon Empire, just across the Channel.

The French Empire, the Prime Minister thought. Unlike the British Empire, which had evolved into accepting the natives as equals, the French had absorbed the Spanish Empire into their own, then sections of the Ottoman Empire, creating an empire that was almost equal to the British Empire. In New Spain, the French waited, holding the line against the North American Union – part of the United Empire.

“One year since the war began,” Grey muttered to himself. It had been a year since the ongoing dispute over China had blossomed into a three-way war; the United Empire fighting the French fighting the Russians...with the Japanese and Brazilians on the side-lines. The three major superpowers, tearing into each other...and none of them had the ability to win. In North America...stalemate. In Iran...stalemate. In the Prussian-Polish region...stalemate. The war was draining all three powers, and none of them would back down. They couldn't.

The telephone rang. It was one of the new landlines, one linked directly to Admiralty House. He picked it up. “Grey,” he said. “Admiral Benson?”

Admiral Sir Martin Benson, First Sea Lord and effective commander of the navies that made up the united fleet of the United Empire, coughed. “It's bad news,” he said, without preamble. “The French have taken the Falklands.”

Grey cursed. The strategic situation was grim. The various Empire navies, between them, were stronger than either the Russian or French navies. The

Chancellor of the Exchequer had been delighted; it was a way of paying less for enough ships, or so they had thought. Instead, with some of the new developments in radar and range-finding technologies, the Royal Navy had been forced to spend more money and develop new tactics...and it wasn't large enough for all the burdens that the war placed upon it. The French Navy lurked in the Baltic and the Mediterranean, waiting for an opportunity to sneak out and crush a squadron or two, while the Russians waited in the Far East for an opportunity of their own.

He allowed himself a moment to stare at the map, wondering if he would find a new solution. The Royal North American Navy had two major fleets; the east force and the west force. In contrast, the French had one fleet in New Spain, which they could move through the canal to combine and crush one of the North American fleets. If they held the Falklands, they would force the North Americans to respond, which would mean weakening one of the fleets and risking a decisive battle.

"Just by sitting there, they're threatening our trade," the Prime Minister muttered. Ships had put in at the Falklands for coal before, and some still did even with the war on.

"And scoring a propaganda victory," Benson added. Grey nodded; the United Empire was made up of several different groups, not all of which were interested in the war, or had different motives for fighting the war. The French and the Russians had to know that; counter-intelligence had been turning up spies for years.

Grey sighed. "Options?"

"Only a thought," Benson said. "We could put together a scratch force, BatCruDiv Seventeen and some units that can be spared from Joseph's force in New Orleans. Like those units the French have, they would be able to outrun anything that could kill them, and handle anything fast enough to catch them."

Grey smiled. "Have them probe the Falklands?"

Benson's voice grew more animated as he thought through the plans. "In fact, we could have the west coast forces make their own moves, which would alarm the French enough to force them to move their own forces through the canal and give Vice-Admiral Felix Anderson a fair shot at the bastards in the Falklands."

The Prime Minister smiled. "See to it," he said. "But warn Porter; we cannot risk

a major defeat.”

Benson’s voice sobered. “Yes, Prime Minister,” he said, and put the phone down. The Prime Minister returned to staring at the map.

“Bastards,” he commented. Peace – even on the lines of a return to the status quo – was acceptable; the problem was that neither the Emperor Napoleon XI nor Tsar Nicolas XX were interested in such a peace. Convinced that they would win the war, convinced that they held supreme power in their countries – and they did, as far as anyone could tell – they would bleed their countries to the last drop of blood to win a war that Harriman Grey suspected was futile.

The world is too large these days, he thought bitterly. For all the blood poured out in the first year of the war, since 2008, the gains had been minimal. Technology favoured the defender, and none of the major empires had anything seriously at risk. He knew, of course, the theories relating to massive bomber forces, but the development of radar – almost as soon as the war broke out – meant that the defender *still* had advantages.

“We need a miracle,” he muttered, and left the office. It was time for his interview with King-Emperor George X, who at least kept out of military operations. He sighed; without a miracle, the war might have to come to an end within a couple of years.

...And if we fall, the Russians will dominate the world, he thought grimly, turning out the light. Centuries of progress would be blown apart in a matter of months.

Chapter One: Transition

Pacific Ocean

TimeLine A

The French helicopter lifted up from the deck of the *George Washington*, carrying *Contre-Admiral* François Videzun back to his own ship, hanging only half a kilometre from the American carrier. The two carriers were very close together, a reflection of the importance of the two units, surrounded by forty-seven ships from seven different nations. With the situation in the Far East threatening to explode, it would require a multinational taskforce to handle the problem...one trusted by the entire world community, one with ships from the entire globe.

What they *had* was Task Force INDIA, under the command of Admiral Jackson. It was a force of unprecedented unity, with major American, British, French and German combatants, and smaller units from Japan, Poland and Australia. It was the most powerful surface force on the planet; two large carriers, three smaller carriers and their escorts. The only question, however, was simple; would they be enough to convince the different nations in the Far East that war was...unwise?

Captain William Morrigan watched grimly as the helicopter vanished into the haze, heading towards its mother ship. The French carrier, the FS *Charles de Gaulle*, was the largest non-American carrier on the planet, even though it lacked the sheer power of the *George Washington*. The French Government had been less than enthusiastic about contributing ships to the multinational force, even though the National Front Government had grudgingly admitted that ships would not help them to contain the chaos in France, and it was reflected in the meeting between *Contre-Admiral* François Videzun and Admiral Christopher Jackson.

“Hard day at the office, sir?” He asked, as Admiral Jackson came into the bridge. Jackson, a short but very stubborn admiral, nodded tiredly. “What did they want this time?”

“*Contre-Admiral* François Videzun wants control of India-2,” Jackson said. Morrigan lifted an eyebrow; the plan was for the task force to divide itself into three separate sections, one force to patrol the Taiwan Straits, one to patrol the South China Sea, and one to remain in reserve.

“Want to bet that he has interests in the region?” Morrigan asked. The South

China Sea had been disputed territory for years, ever since Vietnam broke free from China – or was invaded by the French, depending on which version you choose to believe. “I’m certain that the French Government has them.”

“No bet,” Jackson said. “The French certainly have interests in the region, from oil mining to building their diplomatic influence.”

Morrigan shrugged. The French Government, in many ways, had improved since the election of the National Front; they finally recognised that there was a serious terrorist threat, and they had supported the sanctions on Iran that had finally been established in 2008. On the other hand, they were determined to build up a counter-balance to American power, which suggested...

He vocalised his suspicions. “Do you think that the French have a private agreement with the Chinese?”

Admiral Jackson blinked. The Chinese had long claimed the entire South China Sea – including, not incidentally, the resource-rich islands in the region. Their attitude had almost led to open war between China and Vietnam – which had its own claims – on several occasions, a war that could set the entire region on fire. With the growing importance of Taiwan – and indeed China itself – to the world economy, the United Nations Security Council had acted with unusual speed and organised the dispatch of the multinational force.

“It’s possible, I suppose,” Jackson conceded. The French Government might have signed on to the task force, but they remained aloof from the diplomatic dealings that had surrounded it, from Beijing’s odd agreement to permit the task force to operate near waters China claimed, to Taiwan’s refusal to cooperate with the task force.

“My office,” he said suddenly. Morrigan nodded and motioned to Commander Patrick O’Reilly, his Executive Officer, to take command of the massive vessel. This close to Chinese waters; it was no time to put the ship on reduced alert.

“There are political considerations involved,” Jackson admitted, as soon as they were alone together. Morrigan nodded; he’d expected as much. “Everyone is acting way more reasonable than normal, and the National Command Authority is suspicious.”

“Which is why we’re keeping the French nearby?” Morrigan asked. “Anyone would think that we don’t trust them.”

“We don’t,” Jackson said shortly. “However, the suspicions are greater than that; one possibility is that the Chinese are planning to launch an attack on the fleet.”

Morrigan stared at him. “Sir – Admiral – they’re not insane,” he said grimly. “They can’t destroy this fleet, can they?”

“You tell me,” Jackson said seriously.

Morrigan considered the possibility. “They’ll have to do it with missiles,” he said finally. “They have a respectable force of submarines, but they’ll never get them near us, not unless they’ve managed to duplicate the stealth design that came out of California and Japan recently.”

“The CIA thinks they haven’t,” Jackson said. “Of course...”

The two men shared a glance. Like most servicemen, they had little faith in the CIA, which concentrated on hunting terrorists instead of analysing the capabilities of potentially hostile states. The CIA had missed Japan’s new fleet, the Taiwanese development of nuclear weapons, and the collapse of North Korea...

“Even with the stealth design, they’ll be lucky to get close enough to really hammer us with submarines,” Morrigan said, returning to familiar ground. “It’ll have to be missiles, ones fired in enough numbers to overwhelm us.”

“That’s one possibility,” Jackson said. “This is off the record – so don’t discuss it with *anyone* – but the Chinese have a new government. This government is more nationalistic than the last one, and it’s facing unrest in the streets. People thinking that the development of the Internet and the free market and the economy should naturally lead to more popular participation in government. In such circumstances, a government goes looking for a nice big war.”

“And they’ll get one if they try to take out this force,” Morrigan said. He shook his head. “I don’t buy it, sir; they’ll be starting a war with us, the European Union, Japan...they would have been mad to try anything.”

Jackson nodded. “Saddam was mad to invade Kuwait, let alone trying to stand up to us in 2003,” he said. “It’s impossible to predict how the Chinese will react, if faced with internal unrest and a growing Ghandi-like movement demanding increased democracy.”

Morrigan shook his head. “I don’t think that’s likely,” he said. “However, if it is,

splitting the force might just be giving them what they want.”

Jackson grinned mirthlessly. “And the French want control over the force holding the region that the Chinese want,” he said. “If the Chinese *just* strike at India-1 – us – they might claim to be only going to war with America.”

Morrigan sighed. “Two more days until we reach the point that we have to split up,” he said. “What decision did you make?”

“Referred them to the Joint Chiefs,” Jackson said. He smiled suddenly. “Sadistic, aren’t I?”

“Yes,” Morrigan said. “What will they do?”

“Hum and haw and balance politics,” Jackson said. “It will be a cold day in hell when the Poles let the French have command of one of their ships, particularly after the fuss the French made when they supported us in Iraq. The British... won’t be keen on it either, so that nice German will continue to hold the command.” He sighed. “That British Admiral would probably be better, but the French won’t accept him...”

“Politics,” Morrigan said, making the word a curse.

“That’s right,” Jackson agreed. “Politics.”

“Politics,” *Contre-Admiral* François Videzun snarled, looking into the distance towards the shape of the American carrier *George Washington*. His own flagship, the nuclear-powered FS *Charles de Gaulle*, was powerful and capable, but nothing like as capable as the American ship, which was over a decade old.

“Yes, sir,” Captain Jean-Pierre Mauroy said. “Politics.”

Videzun ignored him, pacing the deck of his cabin. “That damned American refuses to take me seriously,” he snapped. “If he chose to issue the orders, he could please the government and help my career – his Joint Chiefs will go along with his orders, won’t they?”

“Yes, sir,” Mauroy said, who knew the required answer. “They refuse to take us seriously as a military power.”

“It was understandable when there were those old ivory tower men, practicing the art of closing their ears and eyes, while the bearded men took over most of the country, but now...now we are powerful again,” Videzun snapped. A life-long member of the National Front, Videzun had only received his command and admiral’s rank after the general purge that had followed the election of 2008. “We should be in the Mediterranean, helping to seal the flow of immigrant scum, rather than sitting here.”

“We do have interests here,” Jacques Picard, the political officer, said mildly. He held no formal rank, no place in the command chain; his business was simply to observe the crew of the ship. The purge that had wiped out the careerists, the officers who had received their positions for agreeing with the previous governments and the Muslims in the ranks had led – naturally – to political officers.

Videzun glared at him. “Are those interests more or less important than preserving France as a viable nation-state?” He asked. “We have work to do in France!”

“It is under control,” Picard said mildly. Videzun had often considered him to be nothing more than a simple accountant; he certainly had the look right. “The army has crushed opposition to our rule and the people support us. Removing them all back to Algeria and the Middle East will not be a difficult task.”

Videzun looked sharply at him. He might have been a member of the National Front, but like many middle-ranking French officers, he was fairly competent. The competent rarely rose above Commodore – until the election had smashed the previous administration. A few demonstrations of power and the rabble of unruly students had subsided.

He shook his head, forcing his mind back to the present. “Simple logistics will make that difficult,” he said. “There are millions of the bastards.”

“Then we’ll force them into the sea and they can swim,” Picard said. Videzun nodded; he’d commanded the Mediterranean Fleet during the first real Europe-wide interdiction effort. As the chaos from the *American* war in the Middle East spread through North Africa, it had provided the French people with the bravery to overcome a lifetime of political correctness and political conditioning.

“Yes, that should work,” Videzun said. “However, what are we to do about the Americans?”

“Unless the Government chooses to recall the ships, what can we do?” Picard asked dryly. Mauroy nodded; Videzun glared at him. He expected total obedience from his second. “We have to raise the profile of France on the world stage, admiral, and the only way to do that is to perform well in the coming mission.”

“The Americans will steal all the glory,” Videzun muttered.

“The Public Relations Department will see that they do not,” Picard assured him. Videzun considered the Public Relations Department, pumping out propaganda every day on the successes of the National Front, the evils of the Arab immigrants within France and the need to reassume the leadership of Europe, and nodded slowly. “Now, Admiral, what are the plans for the mission?”

Videzun scowled. A bad report from Picard could ruin his career. “We have seven ships here,” he said. “That’s the largest force deployed outside France, by the way. Three of them are the escorts for the *Charles de Gaulle*; the other three are submarines intended to blockade ports.” He shrugged. “Probably Chinese ports, but you know the Americans; fair play and all that.”

He affected a fake upper-class accent. “Have to treat the children fairly and all that, what?”

“I think that’s a British accent,” Picard said. “And – will you have command of India-2?”

“I very much doubt it,” Videzun admitted. “The Americans aren’t too keen on allowing us command of some of their ships...”

“Arrogant bastards,” Mauroy commented.

Videzun nodded. “And the other nations involved in this coalition prefer the Americans to us,” he said softly. “In effect, we may not be able to fulfil the other mission.”

“We have to find a way,” Picard said. The other mission was simple; under the protection of the multinational force Vietnam – an ally of France at the moment, irony of ironies – would establish mining stations in the disputed territories, something that French companies stood to benefit from considerably.

“There may not be one,” Videzun said grimly. A failure with *that* part of his mission might mean that his career would be over; he might even be hauled in

front of a People's Court. "If we do not control the units in the region, the Americans will learn of it in time to stop it. You know what they're like."

Picard nodded. The Americans cared nothing for the economies of any nation, but their own. "If they prevent Vietnam from establishing their stations, a lot of companies stand to lose a lot of money," he said.

"How true," Videzun said. He thought coldly about the missiles the ship carried, the ones intended for whoever would pay the most. "How true."

"China has no right to decree what happens within those waters," Mauroy said insistently. Picard and Videzun exchanged glances; Videzun had handpicked Mauroy for the post, simply because he lacked the imagination to be a threat to Videzun personally. "It has no right."

"I think you will discover that they think they have the right," Videzun said dryly. "Now, are the flight schedules ready? I want a constant CAP over us as soon as we approach the disputed waters, whoever is in command."

The bridge of the *George Washington* wasn't *that* impressive to Sharon Green, a roving embedded reporter from CNN. She looked around at the busy naval officers, performing their duties, and wasn't impressed; the newsroom at Atlanta was far more active during a scoop.

"Right this way, Miss Green," Lieutenant Han Wushi, Public Relations Officer, said. The skinny oriental had come from China originally, his family having escaped when Han was a little boy, and he'd joined the navy to fight communism – the force that had forced his parents away from their nation.

"Thank you," she said, as Han held the door open for her. The navy did so love showing off how gentlemanly its officers were. "It's Sharon, you know."

"I know," Han said, as they stepped into the passage. The Admiral's quarters were near the bridge, allowing instant access in the event of an emergency. "Right this way, Miss Green."

For a Public Relations Officer, he has a limited vocabulary, Sharon thought wryly. Lieutenant Han Wushi wasn't just limited in his speech; he had shown no interest in Sharon herself, even though she wore one of her standard outfits that

showed her curves off to best effect.

“In here,” Han said, tapping neatly on a fixed door. A voice bade them enter.
“Good luck, Miss Green.”

“Thank you,” Sharon said, and swept into the office. A short man greeted her, smiling all the while. “Admiral Jackson, I presume?”

“Yes,” Jackson said. “Sharon Green, I presume?”

Sharon smiled wryly. “If I’m not, my office is in for a hell of a surprise when I start sending them dispatches,” she said. “Admiral, thank you for seeing me.”

“You’re welcome,” Jackson said. “What can I do for you?”

“I have a number of questions,” Sharon said. “May I begin?”

“Of course,” Jackson said. He smiled again. “You may even be seated.”

Sharon took her seat without embarrassment. “Admiral, what do you think of the task force?”

“Overall?” Jackson asked. “It’s a good force, for one thrown together at short notice. We could do with more practice, but we’ve done enough to work together. It helps that we’re all used to NATO protocols.”

Sharon smiled softly. “Everyone is cooperating?” She asked. “Even the French?”

“Despite our current disagreements with the French Government, which – I might remind you – are not over truly huge issues, the French have been very cooperative,” Jackson said. “Indeed, they have presented us with considerable help, filling in holes in the task force structure.”

Sharon frowned. She was certain that she’d detected...something within his voice. “Given the recent censure of the French by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, does sailing with a French force trouble you at all?”

Jackson met her eyes, his gaze almost pressing her into the seat. “That is a matter for the state department,” he said. “I obey orders, which in this case I’m quite happy to do so.”

Sharon smiled, scenting a scoop. "Tell me, does the..."

An alarm started to ring. "Excuse me," Jackson said, moving to his feet with astonishing speed. "That's the air attack alarm."

He swept out of the office. Sharon followed him. Jackson hesitated, as if he was considering ordering her back to her quarters, and then allowed her to follow him.

"Report," he snapped, as he strode onto the bridge. "Bill?"

Captain Morrigan looked up sharply from a radar display. "We have unknown contacts, heading over us," he said. "At least seventy contacts, all...odd."

"They're not quite there," the radar operator said. He pointed to the screen. "I can't identify them at all; they seem to be fading in and out."

"What are they?" Jackson demanded. Sharon watched from the rear of the bridge, wishing that she'd brought her camera. "Missiles?"

"I don't think so," the operator said. "Sir..."

Jackson looked up sharply out of the viewport. A ball of white light was streaking across the sky, swooping down across the task force. Everyone stared at it as it flashed over the carrier and was gone.

"We lost that one," the operator said.

"Sound battle stations," Jackson snapped. An alarm began to ring through the ship. "Captain?"

"They could be St Elmo's fire?" Morrigan suggested. "They don't look like missiles."

"The first flight is ready to go," Captain Jason Groom, air boss, reported. "Captain?"

"Hold the launch," Morrigan snapped. "What does the CAP report?"

"The Frogs and the Brits are having trouble," an officer snapped. "The...ah, UFOs are not hanging around for the aircraft to have a look at them."

Sharon watched as Jackson stared up at the light display. There were dozens of

the little lights now, spinning around the fleet, seeming to watch the fleet from their attitude.

“Sir, weapons are free and ready,” the weapons officer snapped.

“Hold fire,” Morrigan said. “Sir, they can’t be weapons.”

“Concur,” Jackson said. “Raise Washington and inform them that...”

Morrigan interrupted him. “Sir...”

Jackson swung around to look out the viewport and Sharon’s eyes followed him. A ball of light, a UFO, larger than any before was closing in on them. It was hypnotic; she stared into the light and saw...possibilities. Her mind shuddered under the impact...as the ball of light impacted with the carrier and the world went white around them.

Chapter Two: Desperate Measures

Admiralty House

New Orleans, NAU (TimeLine B)

The city of New Orleans had been captured from the Spanish during the Great Global War, back in 1813. The decision of the early viceroys of America – urged on by the Colonial Parliaments – not to surrender the city back to the Spanish had resulted in considerable investment by British companies, as well as a flood of immigrants from Europe.

Vice-Admiral Felix Anderson, Royal North American Navy, stepped up neatly to the gates of the massive complex that controlled the various Empire naval activities within the Caribbean and presented his papers to the Royal Marines on duty. The Marine was Indian, wearing a turban over his head, a reflection of the united nature of the Royal Marines. Unlike almost all of the rest of the Empire's services, the Royal Marines couldn't risk a mistake caused by unfamiliarity; Marines trained as a united Empire-wide force.

"You may pass," the Marine said. His English was perfect, revealing that the education programs had worked perfectly. English was the requirement for all posts within the Empire's administration; it was the only language everyone could agree on. "Admiral Porter's office is in the large building at the end of the complex."

"Thank you, Sergeant," Anderson said. He passed through the checkpoints, avoiding a car of Royal Marines patrolling the perimeter, and walked along the path to the main building. He smiled to himself; security had clearly been tightened up since the war had begun, one year ago.

"Papers, please," a second Marine said. Anderson passed them over, noting that the Sergeant – clearly either American or British – took care to check every little detail. New Orleans had plenty of Frenchmen and Spaniards within its limits, including many who wished for the Emperor Napoleon to rule them instead of the Empire. Independence parties were rife within the region, although the open hostility of the Texans to both parties prevented outright rebellion.

Ungrateful swine, Anderson thought coldly. New Orleans was a hotbed of spies, which was one reason why the seven battlecruisers of his squadron were

remaining outside, even outside of sovereign Empire territory. It was humiliating, no matter how necessary it truly was, just to ensure that a man with British or American citizenship didn't betray them.

"You may pass," the Marine said. "Follow the corridor down to the end, then knock at the door."

"I have been here before," Anderson assured him. The Marines guided people around the house – and they always resented it. "Thank you."

"Just doing my duty," the Marine said. Anderson nodded and followed the directions, ending up in front of a massive oak door, covered with decorations. It had taken an entire team of woodcarvers several weeks to do the decorations, intended to celebrate the visit of one of the King-Emperors to New Orleans. The great naval heroes; Nelson, Porter, Rogers, were captured on the door, almost as alive as they had been the day before they died.

Anderson took a moment to contemplate the designs, then he opened the door and peered through. A young black man – the secretary to the admiral – looked up and smiled.

"Ah, Admiral Anderson," he said. "You're expected."

"Thank you," Anderson said. Being polite to the Admiral's secretary was simple prudence. "Shall I go in?"

"Yes, he's just waiting for you," the secretary said. "Good luck."

Anderson smiled and entered the office. Admiral Sir Joseph Porter glanced up and waved him to a seat, before returning his gaze to a small mountain of documents on his desk. "Have a seat, Felix," Porter said. "I'll just be a moment."

Anderson nodded, taking the seat. Admiral Sir Joseph Porter had a reputation as a martinet, serving his time on a non-British station just to earn the experience that would allow him to make a bid for becoming First Sea Lord. Anderson shrugged; the current First Sea Lord was due to step down in two years, and Porter clearly was in a hurry.

He smiled. An American admiral – the name had slipped his mind – was currently handling the British Home Fleet, making his own bid for the post. Porter would have to be *very* lucky – or be the only obvious candidate – as the current First Sea

Lord was also British.

Porter coughed and Anderson looked up. Porter was a short man, wearing his standard fancy dress uniform, something that was hardly possible in hot New Orleans. He was fat, but in a good way; his blue eyes twinkled as he smiled at Anderson.

“Thank you for coming,” Porter said. “We have something of a...situation on our hands.”

“I had expected that, from the radio message,” Anderson said. “Sir, the submarine patrols aren’t working.”

Porter nodded. “We have to seem as if we’re doing something,” he said. “We also have to *look* as if we can do something, or the French will take advantage of us.”

Anderson nodded. With a total force of fifty American superdreadnaughts and dreadnaughts, to say nothing of what other Empire ships were in the region, Admiral Porter should have been able to handle the French ships; thirty-five superdreadnaughts based permanently in New Spain or Peru. The problem, however, was geography; the Empire ships were divided between the east and west coast, while the French could move ships through the Panama Canal to reinforce and concentrate with ease.

We dare not pick a fight, for fear of the damage, and they dare not pick a fight, for fear of the damage...and so we circle around them and fight it out on the Caribbean Islands, attempting to gain an advantage, he thought grimly. The enthusiasm in the American Parliament for annexing the French islands had faded as the campaign ran into its second year, neither side being able to gain an advantage.

Porter coughed. “The French have managed to pull a fast one on us,” he admitted. Anderson winced; the prospect of the French gaining an advantage was not a pleasing one. “They’ve snatched the Falkland Islands from us.”

Anderson swore. The Falklands was British territory, one of the countless dependences too small to rate representation in the Imperial Parliament. It was part of the Colonial Office’s responsibilities...and it had been an important coaling station and small base for the Royal Navy.

“My thoughts exactly,” Porter said. Anderson realised suddenly that the

Admiralty would be looking for a scapegoat when questions were asked – and Porter would almost certainly be that scapegoat. “Observe.”

Porter stood up from behind his desk and paced over to the massive map of his area of responsibility. The massive French base at Panama was clearly marked, sitting on top of the Canal that linked the Pacific with the Atlantic. Anderson had seen hundreds of plans for attacking it, but all of them had been dismissed as suicide. The only workable plan was the Army’s plan – a ground offensive through New Spain to Panama – but that had bogged down in the general stalemate.

“We dare not spare any units of the Eastern Fleet,” Porter said. “We need those concentrations here. The same goes for the Western Fleet, particularly with Japan sitting on the side-lines. Those slant-eyed bastards might jump on us, or the Russians, or...”

He smiled. Anderson nodded; the Japanese Empire, which consisted of Japan itself, Korea and a handful of minor islands, was officially neutral in the war. Unofficially, it supported the Empire, but it resented its dependence upon British trade, and they had been eyeing the East Indies, which belonged to Australia, which belonged to the United Empire. It didn’t help that there were thousands of Japanese living in the British colonies around the Pacific, exciting major paranoia in Australia.

He scowled. On their own, the Japanese would last less than five months against the concentrated United Empire. In alliance with the Russians...who knew?

“I have some reason to believe that the Russian ambassador has been talking to Emperor Yamamoto,” Porter said. Anderson nodded; the intelligence service had been learning its trade rapidly in the year of war. “While the Foreign Office is confident that there is no real threat of war with Japan, those diplomats don’t have their heads screwed on properly.

“In any case, we have to remain strong in the Pacific, which means maintaining the fleet at Pearl Harbour, and the forces in Australia hunting French raiders. The Russians, so far, have only sent out raiders themselves, but they might change their tactics any day.” He sighed. “Do you remember Admiral Rogers?”

Anderson nodded. Admiral Rogers, very much the designer of the modern navy, had predicted confidently one massive battle when the war began, a massive confrontation between the British and the French. The Russians, who had less

interest in massive battle-fleets, had not been part of his scenario. A year after the war had begun, the French had clearly decided to avoid battle, which meant that the United Empire had to keep massive fleets of its own near the French ports, which limited the amount of protection that could be given to convoys, which...

“Yes, I remember him,” he said. Porter smiled. “So far, all we’ve had are minor actions against convoy raiders and submarines.”

“I dislike wars, they are unpredictable,” Porter misquoted. “No matter; all we have to respond to the Falklands...invasion is your force, and a handful of the new fast troop transports.”

“You expect nine battlecruisers to take on the entire French force?” Anderson asked. “Admiral...Sir Joseph...I...”

“No, I don’t,” Porter said. Anderson wasn’t sure if he should be relieved or insulted. “What I want is a little trickier. I have some reason to believe that the French haven’t moved many troops into the Falklands, not with that minor rebellion in Argentina and the possibility of Brazil coming in on our side.”

“Is that likely?” Anderson asked. Brazil, one of the handful of independent states, held a governing position. If it joined the war, the entire situation could be shifted in the United Empire’s favour. “Have they committed themselves to anything?”

“Not as far as I know,” Porter said, and winked at him. “They’re very dependent upon the French – and us – for some of their trade. If we pressed them, they might jump towards the French, simply for the protection of their economy, which is more dependent upon the French than us.”

“Bother,” Anderson said.

“Back to the situation at hand,” Porter said. He tapped the map. “Your orders are simple, Admiral; you are to follow the roundabout route to Accession, which hasn’t been taken yet, and then attack the Falklands. If the enemy is there in sufficient strength to destroy or cripple your force, you are to break off. If not...”

“Retake the islands,” Anderson concluded. “If it can be done, Sir Joseph, my force will do it.”

“If you face a force that can destroy you, you are to break off,” Porter said sharply. “Felix, we cannot risk losing your ships for the Falklands, important as

they are. If they have a superdreadnaught there, you are to break off.”

“Superdreadnaughts operate in packs,” Anderson pointed out.

“Whatever,” Porter said, dismissing the comment. “They’re experimenting with fire-control radar, just as we are” – Anderson smiled at the disdain in Porter’s voice – “and they might have some unexpected advantages. You also have to watch out for submarines.”

“Yes, sir,” Anderson said. He understood the point, but he also wanted to test his ships against the enemy – and there had been little opportunity beyond submarine patrols that had only caught one submarine.

“I hope so,” Porter said seriously. “This is considerably more risky than I would prefer. We’re in a naval race, at the same time as fighting the war, and the other two major powers are doing the same thing. We cannot afford to lose any ships we don’t have to.”

“Then why are we fighting?” Anderson said. “No gain without pain.”

Porter smiled. “There is a second problem,” he said. Anderson winced. “You have a second problem. Have you heard of a woman called Maggie O’Brien?”

“Irish, I’d guess, from the name,” Anderson said. “No, sir; I haven’t heard of her at all. Is she one of the rebels?”

“Lord God, I hope not,” Porter said. “In its infinite wisdom, the Admiralty has decreed that she is to travel with your fleet.”

Anderson felt his mouth fall open. “A woman, perhaps a spy, on a ship?” He stared at him. “Sir...you commanded ships yourself – you know what sailors are like...”

“Yes, that has been pointed out to her,” Porter said. “She is...insistent.”

“A suffragette, then,” Anderson said. “One of the women who thinks that since they have the vote, they should move into male spheres as well.”

“I haven’t discussed politics with her,” Porter said. “She is, however, a reporter, for the *Irish Times*.”

“Not the *American Times*, then,” Anderson said. The *Times* franchise was all over the United Empire. “Sir...this is not wise.”

“I know it’s not wise,” Porter snapped. “However, I have my orders, and so do you.”

There was only one response. Anderson jumped to attention and saluted. “Sir, yes, sir!”

Porter smiled. “I suspect that after a four-week trip, Miss *Irish Times* will decide that it’s not the life for her,” he said. “There *are* some women on the fishing fleets; some of them would have been a better test subject, if that *is* what she has in mind.”

Anderson blinked. “Sir?”

Porter smiled. “Felix, if that is *not* what she has in mind, then it’s up to you to find out what it is.”

“Aye, aye sir,” Anderson said. “Where do I meet her?”

“Room 101,” Porter said. “Go introduce yourself to her, talk her out of it if you can, and if you can’t, take her back on the launch to the *Amherst*.”

“Aye, aye sir,” Anderson said. “I’ll be back with a victory, or not at all.”

Maggie O’Brien had grown up in Ireland, the most restive section of the United Empire, a nation that had provided more colonists for America and South Africa than England or Scotland. Her father, a drunken loudmouth, had planned to sell her in marriage, a dangerous mistake when dealing with a clever daughter. Maggie had joined the *Irish Times*, moved into her own flat in Dublin, and never looked back.

Her determination had forced her onwards, rising rapidly to higher levels within the *Times* franchise. Her sex, however, proved a barrier; female reporters simply didn’t go where the action was. Her male contemporaries went off to the wars – and sometimes didn’t return – she stayed in Dublin, patronised by all. After the fifth incident of sexual harassment, hardly a recognised problem in Britain, she applied for the post in America, and got it.

“You’ll either do well or not,” Mickey Flynn, her gruff editor, had told her. “Either way, you’re going to get the adventure you wanted – idiot.”

She looked up from the table at her pocket mirror, checking her appearance. She had to look perfect for the Admiral, the one who would be taking her on board his ship. Her red hair was curly and perfect; her green eyes sparkling with life. At twenty-seven, most of her friends and relatives were married, but she was still single.

The door opened and she looked up. A handsome man, with blonde hair and a dry smile, considered her for a long moment. She didn’t know how to read his uniform, but she was certain that all the gold braid meant that he was an Admiral. She stood up and extended her hand for a shake, and wasn’t surprised when he kissed it instead.

“I assume that you are Miss O’Brien,” the Admiral said. “I am Vice-Admiral Felix Anderson, Royal North American Navy.”

His voice was lightly accented, the voice of someone from New York, rather than New Orleans or Canada. “Maggie O’Brien,” she said. “It’s a pleasure to meet you at last.”

She sat down, smoothing her long skirt and smiled as he took the seat opposite her. She was frankly curious how he intended to broach the subject at hand, and wasn’t surprised when he hesitated noticeably. The subject *was* rather delicate, after all.

“Tell me about yourself,” she said, just to break the ice. “How did you end up in the navy?”

“I couldn’t stand the thought of walking behind the rear end of a mule,” Anderson said. He regarded her thoughtfully. “Why?”

Maggie smiled demurely. “Why what?”

“Why do you want to come with the fleet?” Anderson asked bluntly. “It’s not exactly a safe place for a woman.”

Maggie was stung, harder than she had expected. “The safe place I was supposed to have betrayed me,” she snapped. “My mother died of a broken heart. My father planned to sell me to finish drinking himself to death. I’m not exactly a shrinking

violet.”

Anderson smiled. She recognised for a sudden moment a flash of respect in his eyes. “A ship is not a safe place,” he repeated sharply. “Sailors spent *months* away from their homeports, or from women. The unnatural...*vice* is practiced more often than the navy cares to admit, even with the dire punishments lined up for offenders...”

“Sodomy,” Maggie said. “I do know what you mean.”

“You may be raped,” Anderson said bluntly. “There are also hygiene problems...”

Maggie, unexpectedly, found herself warming to the blunt Admiral. The blush on his cheeks at the roundabout mention of menstruation was almost charming. “It’s rather overrated,” she said, as reassuringly as she could. Anderson wore no wedding ring, she noted. “I’ll be fine.”

“And the doctor will be a man,” Anderson finished, ending a long list of dire possibilities. “Miss O’Brien, this will not be a pleasure cruise. You never answered my question; *why?*”

Maggie looked up at him. “I want to do something that no one has ever done before,” she said. “I will be the first female reporter to write her reports from the deck of a battleship.”

“Battlecruiser,” Anderson said absently. “Have you read the Official Secrets Act? It will apply to you as well, Miss O’Brien, and if you break it, you will be spending time in jail, perhaps even facing a hangman’s noose.”

Maggie winced for the first time. “I understand that,” she said. “Admiral, I will be happy to cooperate with the censors.”

“You’ll be the first reporter to do that,” Anderson said dryly. “This really has been a day for turning the world upside down. Very well; come along.”

Maggie blinked. “Admiral?”

“You wanted to come,” Anderson said. “So come then; we have a launch to catch.” He smiled. “The *Amherst* won’t wait for us if we don’t reach it by high tide.”

Chapter Three: Where are we?

USS George Washington

South Atlantic (TimeLine B)

The light faded as quickly as it had arrived, but darkness descended impossibly rapidly. Captain Morrigan stared through the viewport at the night sky, staring at the stars high overhead...and knew that the ship wasn't in Kansas – or even the Pacific – anymore.

“It was daytime two minutes ago,” the reporter said. Morrigan spun round – he'd forgotten about Sharon Green in the sudden confusion – and motioned for the deck officer to escort her back to her quarters.

“Report,” he snapped. “What happened?”

The Communications Officer, Lieutenant Edward Doyle, coughed. “Captain, Admiral, we have no communications at all.”

Admiral Jackson moved over to his console. “What do you mean; no communications?” He demanded. “We've lost contact with Pacific Fleet?”

“We've lost contact with everyone,” Doyle said. He shuddered. “Sir, we have no signals from America, from Australia, from Japan, even from China.”

Morrigan left Admiral Jackson to worry about the communications. He had to look after his ship. “Exec?”

“We seem to have survived,” Commander Patrick O'Reilly said dryly. The Irishman's face was pale. “Radar reports no contacts at all.”

Morrigan stared at him. “That's impossible,” he said. “We were in one of the most travelled regions of the Pacific.”

“I know,” O'Reilly said. “But sir...we have no communications and no radar contacts.”

Morrigan placed the question to one side. “What's our status?”

“No damage that we have located,” O'Reilly said. “The ready flight is ready to

launch, followed by the AWACS bird. All weapons are ready...it's just that we don't have anything to aim at."

Morrigan glanced over at the air boss. "Launch the ready flight, then the AWACS," he ordered. In the eerie darkness, the light of the jet engines flickered as the two fighters launched into the darkness. Minutes later, the massive AWACS followed.

"Captain, a word," Admiral Jackson said. "There's no communications at all, except some transmissions in French – we think."

Morrigan stared at him. The Admiral was stunned by the...event. His face was pasty white. "Nuclear war?"

"We should have been able to sense the detonations," Jackson said. "Hell, we might have seen something."

"And there's no sign of the task force," Morrigan said. "Sir, could we have fallen through a time warp?"

"Impossible," Jackson scoffed. "Such things don't happen in real life."

The Navigator coughed. Commander Talia Taylor, a woman of vaguely Arabic appearance, looked nervous. "Sir, I've been using the computers to take a reading from the stars," she said. "Sir, we're in the Atlantic – the South Atlantic."

Jackson and Morrigan exchanged glances. "How the hell did we get here?" Jackson asked. "What the hell were those things?"

"I have no idea, sir," Morrigan said. "Exec?"

"Can you read the time from the stars?" O'Reilly asked. "Can you tell us what year it is?"

Talia worked her console. The seconds seemed to tick past endlessly. "Sir, it's 2009," Talia said. She hesitated. "Sir, there don't seem to be any satellites in orbit."

Morrigan felt his senses reel. If it was still 2009 – but without any satellites – where the hell were they? "Sonja?"

“The AWACS has found only a handful of contacts, some near the Falklands,” Captain Sonja Robertson, CAG, said grimly. “Sir, the radar picture is...odd.”

“I think we’ll do well to wait for daylight,” Jackson said. “If we can’t raise Atlantic Command...and we certainly should be able to do that, then what do we do?”

Morrigan hesitated. “Then we should be trying to find the nearest NATO base,” he said. “Sir, what could have happened to them?”

“It’s starting to look as if we’re the last survivors of a war,” Jackson said. Morrigan recognised the doubt in his voice. “Comms, what do the signals say?”

“Nothing too useful,” Doyle admitted. “It’s not exactly French, more of a mixture of French and Spanish. I don’t understand it too well; they’re talking about having taken the Falklands from Britain.”

Morrigan blinked. “A second Falklands War causes all the satellites to go down?”

“I don’t think so,” Jackson said. “It’s starting to look as if we’re rather badly lost.”

Morrigan met his eyes. “Lost where?”

Daylight brought no relief to the puzzled crew. The CAP had been reinforced, risking the loss of some aircraft for further information, and the information was confusing. There was only a handful of aircraft, mostly over South America. The massive trans-Atlantic air flights from Durban to Argentina were gone; the constant babble of countless radio and television channels was silent at last.

The CIC was packed with officers, both from the *George Washington* itself and the Admiral’s staff of officers, including some from Britain and Australia. They had been intended for liaising with Admiral Jackson...and now they were lost with the American aircraft carrier.

“That’s a fourteenth contact,” the CAG said, as the AWACS reported the detection of another ship. “It’s heading for the Falklands.”

Admiral Jackson stared down at the display. He was starting to have a very nasty

thought about what had happened to them; this Earth didn't reassemble theirs at all. "I think it's time we took a look at the Falklands," he said. "Captain Morrigan; prepare a recon flight for immediate dispatch."

Morrigan blinked at him. "Sir, if there has been an attack, we might be the only remaining American ship," he said.

"If a power can move us halfway around the world, then it doesn't have to worry about us," Jackson said. "Launch the aircraft."

Morrigan saluted and headed off to arrange the flight with the air boss and the CAG. Jackson returned to his worried thoughts; what *had* happened to them? It defied belief that the Chinese, or the Russians, or *anyone* could have hammered the United States so completely that there was nothing left, bar the *Washington*. The time index didn't seem to have changed at all; they'd been moved around the world, but they hadn't fallen through a hole in time.

"This is Recon-One," a voice said, echoing through the CIC. "Sir, I'm about to perform a high-level reconnaissance of the Falklands."

"Put it on the big display," Morrigan ordered. Jackson nodded. "Any sign of the British Tornados or Sea Harriers?"

"Nothing, sir," the pilot replied. Jackson glanced at his display; Captain Rupert Potter. "Beginning recon run now."

The display flickered and began relaying the signals. The lack of any British aircraft rising to contest the airspace, or of any radar or fire control emissions at all, was worrying. The Falklands appeared on the display, with seven ships in the Falklands Sound. The ships were...odd, to say the least.

Morrigan put it into words. "What the hell are they?"

"I have no idea," Jackson said. "Weapons?"

There was a short pause while Commander Thomas Henderson, Weapons Officer, studied the images. "Sir, they don't match anything we have in service, or anyone else," he said finally.

"I had guessed that," Jackson said. The unknown ships reminded him of nothing less than battleships; they looked older than the *Iowa* or the *Missouri*, and yet

somehow...newer. "Think outside the box, son."

Henderson coughed. "Unless I miss my guess, sir, and I probably do, they're superdreadnaughts," he said. "They were an updated design from just before the First World War and some of them survived to fight in the Second World War."

"We have air contacts," the CAG snapped. "Unknown aircraft, rising from the Falklands, near Stanley."

"They're no threat," Captain Rupert Potter assured them. "They're ancient crates."

Jackson looked up at the images again. The aircraft reminded him of the older fighters, the designs that had been created before the Second World War. They didn't have a hope of catching the F-14, even if they had the weapons to damage it.

"They must have heard the engines," Morrigan muttered. "Sir, I think we're rather out of our depth here."

"I really hope that was a joke," Jackson said dryly. Morrigan smiled at the weak joke. "Order the plane to return here, then...well, I think we'd better decide what to do."

Lieutenant Sally Woods, Assistant Supply Officer, was the closest thing that the carrier had to a genuine historian. After having joined the navy in hopes of learning to fly, Sally had been pointed gently towards supply, an office that her ability to make work easier for everyone made very easy. In between rigging the supply manifest to ensure that the *George Washington* had everything it needed, regardless of Congressional oversight, she studied and studied, earning degrees that she never put to any real use.

After all, as she had remarked to her superior on more than one occasion, she was constructively lazy.

The puzzle put in front of her, however, was...odd. The Falklands seemed to be larger and smaller than they were in the original timeline, for she was confident that they had slipped through a dimensional warp. She'd spent ten minutes attempting to explain the concept, but Captain Morrigan hadn't really understood.

“For everything that happens,” she’d said, “there are thousands of possible alternatives. As an example, there is one universe where you put on your socks in one way, and another where you did the opposite. That universe splits from ours at the moment of decision.”

“I don’t understand,” Morrigan had admitted. “How is a universe where I wear one pair of regulation socks different from a universe where I wear a different pair of regulation socks?”

Sally smiled. “Ah, but pretend that you have a choice between two pairs of panties,” she’d continued. Morrigan gave her a dry look, but said nothing. “One pair is comfortable, you have a good night on the town and all the good things happen, leading to you marrying the guy and having your kids. The other pair *itches*, and you have a bad night and end up slapping him when he tries to get cosy. The net result is that you have no kids, at least not with him.”

“I get the point,” Morrigan had said. “Now, can you tell us what’s different here?”

They’re not as advanced as we are, Sally thought, studying the images. The radar was primitive; it would be odds-on that it would be completely unable to *find* the American aircraft, let alone bring one of them down. On the other hand, those superdreadnaughts – and she hadn’t been able to find a match for the design – looked to be tough; could the *George Washington* out-perform them?

“I don’t have the slightest idea what’s different,” she admitted, an hour later. “I’m confident that we have indeed slipped into an alternate universe, but I don’t have any idea how it’s different.”

Admiral Jackson paced the small cabin. “Is there any way to get back home?” He asked. “Anything in the literature?”

“Nothing that I know about,” Sally admitted. It suddenly struck her that she would never see her husband again. It almost made up for the long sea voyages she’d taken to get away from him. “Sir, we need more information.”

“I had figured that out,” Jackson said dryly. “Lieutenant, is there any clue in the images?”

“None,” Sally said grimly. “From the images, there are some flags, and it’s clear that a minor battle was fought in the Falklands, but I don’t know who fought it.”

“The British, from the radio transmissions,” Morrigan added. “They seem to have lost, but to whom?”

“There’s no way to be certain,” Sally said. “Sir, they do seem to be less advanced than we are. Simply remaining over the horizon will keep us safe for a long time, and I’m almost certain they don’t have nuclear power. They have radar, but it’s nowhere near as capable as ours, and they don’t seem to have jets at all.”

Morrigan scowled. Sally admired the scowl absently. “We’re groping in the dark,” the Captain said. Sally nodded. “We really need up-to-date information.”

Jackson frowned, his small form twitching with the responsibility of his position. “How do you suggest we do that?” He asked. “We can’t take the Falklands back...”

“We could head towards America,” Sally said. She hesitated. “If it exists in this timeline, of course.”

“I would sooner accept a fall back in time than an...alternate reality,” Jackson said. “It’s at least a week at maximum towards America, and we might bump into something on the way.”

“We could head for Accession,” Morrigan suggested. “It might still be a minor shipping centre, a place where we could pick up some information.”

Sally tapped the images on the desk. She’d had a bright idea. “Sir, we could just make contact with whoever is holding the Falklands,” she suggested. “They are the closest force to us.”

Jackson shook his head. “I don’t think that that is a good idea,” he said. “We know nothing about them, nothing at all.”

“They can’t threaten the carrier, can they?” Sally asked innocently. “We could just ask them what’s happening.”

“Until we know what is going on, I would prefer to avoid direct contact with an unknown force,” Jackson said. “I’ll risk it for an American force, but not for anyone else.”

Sally nodded. “Yes, sir,” she said.

“One question,” Morrigan said. “Do you have any idea where the...ah, Point of Divergence is?”

Sally smiled at him absently. “Only a rough guess,” she said. “The general level of technology seems to be between 1914 and 1930, with the possible exception of radar. That would suggest that the Point of Divergence was sometime before then, perhaps some years before.”

“Thanks,” Jackson said. “Keep studying the information and we’ll inform you if you’re needed.”

Sally stood up and saluted, before leaving the cabin to return to the intelligence centre. She was fascinated by the entire puzzle...and if some of her suspicions were accurate, the *George Washington* would have no need for a supply officer.

Not for some time, at any rate.

“You seem to know a lot about this stuff,” Jackson said, removing his cap as Lieutenant Sally Woods closed the door behind her. “I don’t suppose that this is a test of some kind?”

Morrigan shook his head. “If it is, sir, I’m as much in the dark as you are. I was just fond of Turtledove and Stirling – and Birmingham, come to think of it.”

Jackson smiled absently. “How’s the crew morale?” He asked. “They’re cut off from *everything*.”

Morrigan shuddered. “It’s not quite sunk in yet,” he said. “Sir, we’re going to have trouble when it does.”

“I expect that,” Jackson said. “God, I wish I had the rest of the fleet along. Even *Contre-Admiral* François Videzun would be pleasant company right now.”

“Bite your tongue,” Morrigan advised. “Sir, do we set course for Accession?”

“In the absence of any better ideas,” Jackson said. “I don’t think we have a choice, do you?”

Morrigan shook his head. “We’d better keep a full CAP over our heads,” he said.

“Only two aircraft and the AWACS,” Jackson said. He’d been thinking as fast as he could. “Captain, how far can we travel?”

Morrigan blinked. “The range of this ship is supposed to be unlimited,” he said. “The nuclear plant has...oh *fuck it!*”

“Exactly,” Jackson said absently. “We will run out of food. From now on, we go on rations. We will run out of weapons, of fuel, of everything we need to function. Captain, I think that we’d better move faster; we have to know what the hell is going on here.”

“Yes, sir,” Morrigan said. “I’ll go give the orders now.”

Hawk One, otherwise known as Captain Rupert Potter, shook his head as the F-14 nosed its way into the sky. He didn’t believe for a moment the reports that they were in an alternate universe, even though the Falkland Islands had been defended by craft out of the past. He’d been tempted to have buzzed them, but the CAG would have torn him a new asshole if he’d even dared to hint at the prospect.

“This is Hawk One,” he said, as the F-14 fell into its patrol pattern. He wasn’t convinced that it was needed – if *anything* in this crazy dimension could even *find* the carrier, the AWACS would see it coming in time for the entire air wing to be launched – but he understood the need to keep everyone occupied. A busy crew would have no time to brood.

“This is Charlie-One,” the AWACS replied, and then sent him a series of instructions. They were simple; he was to hold point position ahead of the massive carrier, and respond to any contacts on the radar. Below him, the massive shape of the *George Washington* turned, heading northeast towards Accession.

Time passed slowly, too slowly for Potter’s comfort, before the AWACS hailed him again. “Hawk-one, we have contacts at sea level, heading southwest towards the Falklands. Recon them.”

“Acknowledged,” Potter said. He checked his instruments quickly, and then put the F-14 into a dive, spinning out just above the waterline. His radar was picking up the contacts, seven large ships, and six smaller ships, heading on a direct course for the Falklands.

“I can confirm visual contact,” he said, as the F-14 screeched over the ships. They had clearly seen him; he was low enough to see sailors on the decks, pointing and gaping at him. The massive superstructure of the ships was like something out of the past; the USN had nothing of their size. “Charlie-one, they can see me.”

“That’s not too surprising,” the AWACS controller said. “Hawk-one; can you perform a second recon swoop?”

“Acknowledged,” Potter said. He swooped around, admiring the massive ships on the surface with awe...and then saw the flag. Not all of the flags were recognisable, but one of them was clearly a Union Jack. A second seemed to be Australian, but he only got one look at it before he passed over the small force and headed away from them.

“Control, they’re British,” he said. “Sir, that’s a British ship in the fleet.”

“Understood,” the AWACS said. “Captain, hold position high over the fleet. The Admiral is deciding what to do.”

Chapter Four: Unidentified Flying Objects

HMNAS *Amherst*

South Atlantic (TimeLine B)

“So tell me, what do you think of the fleet?”

Vice-Admiral Felix Anderson allowed himself a moment to consider, sipping his wineglass thoughtfully, as Maggie O’Brien asked the question. The table, strewn with the remains of a good dinner for the eighteen senior officers in the fleet, had been well laid; the dinner had been excellent, as always.

“A very good question, Miss O’Brien,” he said, considering his answer. “It is a formidable force, to be sure.”

Maggie looked sharply at him, searching for traces of mockery. Two weeks into the voyage, he was starting to think that bringing her along wasn’t such a bad idea; she was good and intelligent company. She was also easy to look at, he acknowledged without guilt. Under other circumstances, he might have invited her out to start the process of courtship.

“That’s not exactly what I asked,” Maggie said, waving a hand around the table. “How does the fleet perform?”

Anderson smiled. Perhaps the courtship could be permitted after all. Admirals were expected to marry, after all. “The fleet performs as well as can be expected,” he said, and was unsurprised to see her scribble it down in a little notepad she carried around. “It’s not as practiced as I would wish, but...”

He shrugged. Maggie smiled at him, turning up the charm a little. “The fleet has nine ships from different navies,” he said. “Do you not have problems with the units?”

It was a perceptive question, Anderson acknowledged. “That’s not exactly true,” he said. “We have six American units, the original units for Battlecruiser Division Seventeen as planned. Then we have a British ship, an Indian ship, and an Australian ship. While I would have liked to have had more time to practice drilling the fleet, it’s as good as is needed for the task at hand.”

“Thank you,” Maggie said. She sipped her wine glass thoughtfully. “Have you ever considered transferring to one of the other navies?”

“Bit hard to do that as a Vice Admiral,” Anderson said. “At least, a full transferral would be. When you reach Admiral’s rank, you are expected to have an established career path.”

“And where does yours lead?” Maggie asked, chewing her pencil thoughtfully. The electric light flickered slightly as the generator flickered, deep within the battlecruiser’s hull. “Where do you see yourself in ten years?”

“An odd question,” Anderson observed. “Where do I see myself, indeed?”

Maggie smiled. “Assuming you survive the war,” she said.

Anderson smiled back. “Miss O’Brien, I hope to rise to Station Commander, perhaps,” he said. “A superdreadnaught squadron is a far more complex unit than a battlecruiser – and it’s boring.”

“Everyone expected a battle for the seas the day after the war broke out,” Maggie agreed. “Instead...we have endless stalemate. Back in Amherst, the MP for Pitt County was asking why the fleet, which had cost millions of pounds, wasn’t pushing the offensive against the French. The Texans, on the other hand, want the fleet to force the French Navy out of the Caribbean.”

She paused, inviting comment. “The problem is that we have to remain concentrated against the French,” Anderson said finally. “Their raids on the Texas coast are annoying. At the same time, we cannot risk a major battle without the odds being in our favour, simply because of the dangers of losing a large percentage of the fleet.”

“So Admiral Porter said,” Maggie said calmly. “What do you think of it?”

Anderson considered. “Off the record?” Maggie nodded. “Off the record, I would like a more aggressive policy. The Russians and the French are both raiding our convoys, which distracts attention from fighting the real battle at sea. At the same time, we have to include escorts to ensure that the submarines don’t engage the superdreadnaughts and sink them by surprise.”

Maggie nodded daintily. “Are the French and the Russians sticking to the convention governing submarine warfare?” She asked. “There are...rumours

of...”

She broke off. “It’s hard to say,” Anderson admitted. He paused; the censors would cut it, would they not? “There have been rumours of fast civilian ships being hit by submarines, but there’s been no proof. Unfortunately, the advantages of a successful submarine blockade of Britain itself are so self-evident that they *have* to be working hard on deploying newer submarines that can turn the advantages they have into war-winning weapons.”

“Such as sealing off the heart of the British Empire,” Maggie said, with the traditional Irish disdain for their English cousins. “What would happen if they managed it?”

“That’s as likely to happen as the bomber offensive actually managing to hurt us, or them,” Anderson said. He knew that the problem had been extensively studied by all of the United Empire’s navies, but all of them had concluded that submarine warfare was overrated. “The technology doesn’t exist to turn such grandiose dreams into reality, no matter how much the French might want to do so.”

He paused for a moment’s thought. “When aircraft were invented, everyone believed that they would change the course of the war, but have they? The only major change is in reconnaissance, artillery spotting and some bombing raids, none of which inflict major damage on the enemy.”

“And theirs inflict nothing on us,” Maggie agreed. “The men of the Royal American Flying Corps will be pleased to hear that their labours count for nothing.”

Anderson smiled delightedly. The air battles over New Spain and Texas were legendary. “Even without the fighters, the French could accomplish little with the bombs they can carry,” he said. “Scaling up the bombers is possible, of course, and we’ve been doing that ourselves, but there are so many problems to solve, including guidance.”

“True,” Maggie said, apparently tiring of the discussion. “How confident are you of victory in the coming battle?”

“Very confident,” Anderson said. “We’ve been drilling for the last week – this dinner was to celebrate the completion of the first series of drills – and we’re ready for the battle, assuming that we fight it.”

“So you intend to seek battle,” Maggie said. “What about the orders from Admiral Porter?”

Anderson lifted an eyebrow. The orders had been meant to be confidential. “Admiral Porter ordered me to avoid battle if the enemy was stronger than we were,” he said. “I am confident that we can break away, if we have to, should the enemy have more ships or firepower than we have.”

“I see,” Maggie said. “When are we going to reach the Falklands?”

Anderson grinned. “In a week,” he said. “We just left Accession, and the French haven’t shown their faces there. That suggests that we’ll have a clear run to the Falklands.” He sighed. “Unfortunately, we don’t know exactly what there is to face there,” he said. “I was hoping that a freighter would put into the Falklands, but no luck.”

“The islands are only useful during peacetime,” Maggie commented. She smoothed her skirt down demurely. “If the enemy holds them, then the freighters have to go to Durban instead, and then cross the Atlantic above the equator.”

“You’ve done your research,” Anderson said, impressed. “How are you adapting to the voyage?”

“It’s not as bad as I had feared,” Maggie said. “Thank you for the stateroom, by the way.”

“You’re welcome,” Anderson said, automatically. “No trouble with the crew?”

“Just some wolf-whistles,” Maggie said. “Compared to some of the harassment in the newspaper world, it’s hardly anything.”

“Imagine a less refined world than sailors at sea,” Anderson said dryly. “Don’t forget; you’re committed to the battle now.”

Maggie smiled at him. “I do understand,” she said. “I can’t wait for the article I’m going to write about it. I can forward it from Accession – seeing they cut the connection to the Falklands – and then the *Times* will publish it everywhere.”

“I’ll look forward to reading it,” Anderson said. He stood up. “Unfortunately, I have duties to attend to.”

“But the night is young,” Maggie protested, and spoiled the effect with a yawn. “I could stay up for hours yet.”

“Child,” Anderson said, with genuine affection. She *was* good company. “Go to bed, Miss O’Brien; morning will be here soon.”

“Goodnight,” Maggie said. Anderson half-wondered if she was going to kiss him, but she settled for a formal curtsy before leaving the stateroom. Smiling to himself, Anderson called for the stewards to clear the room and headed for his own cabin.

Maggie O’Brien, you are an idiot, Maggie thought, as she changed for bed. She had been very tempted to kiss the Admiral, breaking a lifetime of celibacy. Despite New York’s claim to be the most libertine city in the United Empire, it hadn’t had any potholes for her to fall into. Men, by and large, were rivals and nuisances, people who had all the power and made all the rules.

Still, the long voyage hadn’t been *bad*, not in the sense that it was a hellish trip. It was strange, to have a steward perform the task of waking her, instead of a maid. The battlecruiser was a stable ship, but she’d still been dreadfully seasick for the first couple of days. She’d spent the first few days wandering the ship, exploring it, and then she’d stayed in her cabin, reading books on the recent history of the Falklands.

She smiled to herself. Her editor had been confident that the public needed to know things like why the empire was fighting a war, which meant transferring information to them as carefully as possible. Newspapers had been sued for getting the information wrong, or misleading people, and honesty was the bedrock of the system.

So, how do I tell people about the Falklands? She asked herself, considering the discovery of the islands – the first European discovery, that was – and how eventually the islands had become a permanent British territory, with five thousand inhabitants. The Falklands had never sought more than local government for themselves; unlike the Americans or the Indians, the islanders had never sought the reins of power within the empire as a whole.

Instead, they had stayed on their islands, not bothering anyone, until the war had come to bother them. She shook her head; she’d read some of the reports from the

lines in Texas and Iran. The war was horrific – and it seemed to be endless. How long could any of the three superpowers hold out against its opponents, when they had to fight on several different fronts at once.

She finished pulling on her nightshirt and checked herself against the mirror. She'd been amused to discover the mirror, until Admiral Anderson has explained that it served to allow an Admiral to check his uniform for any little problems, such as a dress sword on back to front.

Maggie had laughed. "Does that really happen?" She'd asked. "I would have thought that men had it easy when it came to dressing."

Anderson had sighed. "I'd sooner wear a dress than the dress uniform they designed for formal dinners," he said. "It may look good, but it would tear if I had to give orders while wearing it."

Maggie smiled at the memory, before checking the lock on the hatch. Anderson had warned her, in no uncertain terms, to keep the cabin locked when she was in it, just in case. She hadn't really been harassed by the sailors – certainly nothing as bad as Anderson had led her to fear – but he had insisted. She smiled; he was so cute when he was concerned.

She pulled herself into the bed and turned out the light, closing her eyes to go to sleep. Sleep came harder than she'd expected; the night broken by a rugged handsome face, all angles in the night. After a while, her hand slipped down between her legs – sinful it might have been, but she'd long overcome *that* scruple.

The Captain of HMNAS *Amherst* was black, something unusual in the navy. After the long slow process of ending slavery, the former slaves – and their descendants – had mainly gone into farming; the Freedom Fund had worked hard to ensure that they didn't have to go through a process of being re-enslaved in all, but name. He saluted as Vice-Admiral Felix Anderson entered the bridge.

"The Admiral is on the bridge," the Royal Marine announced. There was no practical reason to have a Marine guard on the ship's bridge – it was tradition and therefore unquestionable. The crew stood rapidly, those who hadn't been standing already, and saluted.

“As you were,” Anderson snapped. He thought that the entire procedure was ridiculous; it was banned during a battle, but then everyone would have more important things to worry about than an admiral’s wounded dignity. “Captain?”

Captain George Caesar saluted Anderson, his white teeth flickering under his dark skin. “There’s been an odd incident,” he said. Anderson glanced up in alarm. “The French are all agitated about something.”

Anderson blinked. Caesar was competent and imaginative, a man not given to panic. If Caesar was alarmed, it was wise for him to be alarmed as well. “What’s happened?”

“Lieutenant Homchoudhury wants to brief you,” Caesar said. “However, their radio traffic seems to have increased.”

Anderson nodded and beckoned for both of them to follow him into the staff room by the side of the bridge, perfectly placed for classified meetings. It was an open secret that all three empires intercepted radio transmissions from their enemies; what *wasn’t* an open secret was that the United Empire – and presumably the French and Russians as well – was deciphering the codes used for classified radio signals. He knew, Caesar knew, and Lieutenant Homchoudhury knew – they were the only men on *Amherst* cleared for that information.

“What exactly has happened?” He asked, as soon as the three of them were alone in the staff room. “Tell me *everything*.”

Lieutenant Amit Homchoudhury winced. It was the subject of a running battle between the War Cabinet and the Admiralty on one side, and Intelligence on the other, over how much information could be released to the rank and file, even officers as high as Anderson and Caesar.

“We have been intercepting radio messages, in the clear, from the Falklands,” Homchoudhury said. The little Indian wasn’t navy; he was on loan from Intelligence. His dark skin contrasted oddly with the white uniform he wore. “They all report the same thing; a strange aircraft flew over the Falklands, some hours ago.”

Anderson blinked. “I don’t suppose that we have a seaplane tender around?” He asked. “Admiral Porter didn’t mention one, did he? He never mentioned one to me.”

“Not as far as I know,” Caesar commented. “I thought that all of them were supposed to be with the major fleet units.”

“They are,” Anderson said. “Even so...that does put the cat among the pigeons. Do we continue, knowing that the French are alarmed?”

“I don’t think, from the panic, that it was a seaplane,” Homchoudhury said. “The French would recognise and understand a seaplane – they might even be able to shoot it down. The reports say that it was high enough to avoid the fighters on the Falklands, and well out of range of the anti-aircraft guns mounted on the islands.”

Anderson shook his head slowly. “I don’t suppose they let you know anything else that might be useful,” he said. He scowled; the mystery of the unexplained aircraft was distressing. It might be nothing, the result of too much alcohol the night before, but he couldn’t think of any way that that could place the entirety of New Spain on alert.

“No, sir,” Homchoudhury said. He paused, significantly, the expression of a staff officer charged with protecting his commander. “Sir, do we proceed?”

Caesar nodded firmly. “Sir, nothing has changed,” he said. “We should press on. If the French are alarmed, so much the better for us. Scared and nervous enemies are more likely to give up.”

Anderson opened his mouth, but the jangling of the alarm brought him to a halt. “Air attack,” he snapped, and led the way to the bridge. Caesar’s executive officer was relieved to see them...as a massive aircraft flashed over the ship.

Anderson felt his mouth fall open. It was white and deadly. He knew without knowing how he knew that the cylinders under its wings were weapons. It passed overhead, screaming a war cry with its engines, and vanished into the distance. He swung around, hoping to catch a second sight of the mystery aircraft, and lost it in the blue sky. It had passed out of sight in seconds. He was awed...and not a little scared. If it was a French aircraft...

If it was a French aircraft, it would be bombing us by now, he thought, and was slightly reassured.

“Beat to quarters,” Caesar snapped, directing his instructions to his crew. The *Amherst* crew was well drilled; they came to full alert in a matter of moments. “Radar?”

“No track on it, sir,” the radar operator said, nervously. Anderson sympathised; radar was growing all the time, but it was still a very inexact science. “No, I have something, behind us...”

The aircraft swooped back, far too close to the water for comfort, dodging between ships with ease. It was too low for the anti-aircraft guns to hit it, Anderson realised grimly, if it collided with one of the transports...

It didn't, swooping back into the air with ease and vanishing into the distance, on a course not quite towards the Falklands. The black dot vanished into the distance, hidden within the blue sky...and then it returned, taking up station high above the task force. Anderson winced, expecting bombs to fall, but instead it just paced the small fleet.

“Radar?” He asked.

“There's something wrong with my equipment,” the radar operator said. His voice was trembling with frustration. “Sir, it's like...it's like someone else is using a powerful radar close by.”

“See if you can triangulate the source,” Caesar suggested, gently. “Admiral?”

“We can't knock it down from up there,” Anderson said, who had thought of nothing else since the mystery aircraft had appeared. “That suggests...that the French might have had a valid reason to panic, after all.”

Chapter Five: First Contact

USS *George Washington*/HMNAS *Amherst*

South Atlantic (TimeLine B)

“That’s definitely a British flag,” Colonel Sir Benjamin Phillips said. The British Marine Colonel smiled grimly at Lieutenant Sally Woods, who frowned back. Losing her husband was one thing – and without him she would be free at last – but losing the entire world? “That one there, I think, is an Aussie flag. The others...?”

Sally frowned. One of the flags was...odd; a strange elephant design, with a Union Jack in the corner. The others, the ones on six of the strange ships, were even stranger; a Union Jack in the corner, with a circle of thirteen stars in a blue background. It reminded her of the European Union flag, except for the stars being white, and the Union Jack.

A British-run European Union? She asked herself, wishing that she knew more about the strange alternate timeline. What had happened? Where had the timelines diverged?

“We should be making contact with them,” Phillips said loudly, addressing Admiral Jackson. “They’re friendly.”

“We may have no choice,” Sally agreed, even though she knew better than to accept that they were friendly at face value. “We may have to face a very different situation here than we faced in the home timeline.”

She shook her head. In her studies of history, the prospect of counterfactual scenarios was nothing new, but for the rest of the crew they were not only new, but something that was preventing them from returning home. So far, the busywork was keeping everyone busy, but it wouldn’t be long before everyone knew that they were cut off from all that they knew.

I wonder if there is an America here, she thought, and frowned grimly. It didn’t seem likely, did it? She hadn’t shared that thought with anyone else, not yet, but...

Captain Morrigan’s voice broke through her musings. “Admiral, the ships are

moving in our direction,” he said. “I don’t know how, but they have a rough idea of where we are.”

“Clever,” Jackson said. “Any thoughts on how?”

Stress, Sally thought, and smiled. What was a historical laboratory to her was life and death to the rest of the crew, trapped on the wrong side of the looking glass.

“They might have noted the direction of the F-18,” Captain Sonja Robertson suggested. “When will they be here?”

“Perhaps an hour, perhaps less,” Morrigan said. His voice was just as tired. “Sir, if we want to evade them, we have to start moving. I’m not sure how, but those bastards are pulling more speed than we can.”

“Balls,” Jackson said. He scowled angrily. “Captain, I believe it’s time to implement First Contact.”

“Yes, sir,” Morrigan said. “Sir, are you sure that *you* should go?”

“It needs a senior officer,” Jackson said. Sally smiled; they were all too tired. They’d had the same argument at least twice before. “Without the rest of the task force, I’m about as useful as tits on a bull.”

“Yes, sir,” Morrigan said. “The helicopter is being prepared now.”

Sally scowled. “Sir, what happens if they’re hostile?”

Jackson glared at her. “Then we’re screwed,” he said. “Still, if we can’t find the America of this timeline, then we might as well contact the most likely allies.”

Sally thought about the history of relations between Great Britain and her former colony and scowled. “Sir, request permission to go with you,” Phillips said. “I might be able to talk to them.”

Sally smiled. “Me too,” she said. “It’s every historian’s dream.”

“This has to be a nightmare,” Jackson said. “All right, you’re coming. Come along.”

Phillips saluted. “Side arms?”

Jackson paused to consider. “There’s no protocol for this,” he said. “Remind me to take it up with the Pentagon when we get home.”

If you get home, Sally thought coldly. “I would advise only sidearm,” she said. “Let’s face it, if we have to fight our way off the ship, we’re doomed anyway.”

The strange otherworldly radar was still pulsing, isolated to a location several miles from BatCruDiv Seventeen, and the small force was closing in. Vice-Admiral Felix Anderson allowed himself a hunter’s smile; whatever force was behind the strange aircraft, still hanging over their heads, he would face it sooner or later.

Lieutenant Homchoudhury coughed. “Sir, we’re receiving a transmission,” he said. “It’s on the main frequency for our ships...”

Anderson blinked. International agreement gave each of the three superpowers a series of private frequencies, just to handle all of the different signals without adding to the confusion. Naturally, all three superpowers monitored the frequencies...and experimented from time to time with jamming them. It was one of the things that had made the world so much more dangerous during the run-up to the war.

“What does it say?” Anderson said grimly, realising that all was lost. There was no chance of sneaking up on the Falklands now; the French would be monitoring the transmission.

“Here, sir,” Homchoudhury said, passing over the headphones. Anderson listened carefully, realising that the message was repeating itself, several times over.

“This is Admiral Jackson of Task Force India, calling the British ships,” it said. “I request permission to land to discuss the recent sightings of my aircraft over your positions. Please acknowledge.”

“I beg your pardon,” Anderson said, puzzled. “Is there an Admiral Jackson in the navy?”

Caesar shrugged. “There’s a General Jackson in Texas,” he said, puzzled. “I don’t know any senior officer called Jackson over here.”

“And what’s with that accent?” Anderson asked, growing even more puzzled. A thought struck him. “How the hell does he propose to land on the *Amherst*?”

Caesar’s eyes flickered with genuine alarm. The *Amherst* was not a seaplane tender; she didn’t even have a seaplane mounted on the deck like some superdreadnaughts. “He can’t,” he said. His gaze drifted over the placid sea. “Perhaps he intends to land on the sea and come abroad.” He paused significantly. “Sir, you have to acknowledge.”

Anderson was too worried to be embarrassed. He spoke into the microphone. “This is Vice-Admiral Felix Anderson, Royal North American Navy, commanding officer of BatCruDiv Seventeen. You cannot land on my ship, Admiral; it’s impossible. If you have a seaplane, it is cleared to land.”

“Thank you,” the reply came back, through the static. Anderson realised with a sudden shock that their equipment was not totally compatible. “We will hover over your main deck in five minutes.”

The connection broke. “What are they talking about?” Caesar asked. “Sir...”

The radar operator interrupted, something that only happened when it was urgent. “Sir, we have a contact coming in from the southeast, heading towards us. It should be visible any moment now.”

Anderson looked up, through the portal. The sky was as clear as ever – he couldn’t see the strange aircraft that was shadowing his force – and then he saw it. A strange dragonfly-like aircraft, painted black, was heading towards the *Amherst*.

“They’ve located us as the flagship,” Caesar muttered. Anderson nodded, watching the strange aircraft as it slowed down, heading directly over the *Amherst*. It seemed to hang in the sky, the noise of its...rotating blades echoing over the battlecruiser’s hull. The crew stopped their duties to stare at the strange aircraft, watching with awe as a rope ladder fell from it to the prow deck of the *Amherst*.

“Not men from Mars after all,” Lieutenant Robin Redbreast muttered. The Gunnery Officer had bet on aliens invading the Earth. Anderson smiled, watching as four men – no, one of them was very obviously female – scrambled down the ladder, hitting the deck.

“Mister Exec, you have command,” Caesar said, as he followed Anderson outside,

heading down to the prow. The rope ladder was being pulled back into the strange aircraft, which was moving gently away from the battlecruiser.

“We don’t have a protocol for this,” Anderson muttered to Caesar, as he fixed his cap firmly on his head. “What the hell do we say to them?”

“Who are you?” Caesar said wryly. “That strikes me as a good first choice.”

Anderson smiled wryly as they reached the four strangers. The short older man in the centre was the obvious leader; Admiral Jackson, perhaps. The taller man with the handlebar moustache was an army officer, or Anderson would eat his hat. The Union Jack suggested that he was British. The tough-looking man in Khaki had no rank badges, but he was armed, suggesting a bodyguard of some kind. The woman was a total mystery.

Do I salute or not? He asked himself. He saluted anyway; there was something otherworldly about the four men, something...odd. “Vice-Admiral Felix Anderson, Royal North American Navy,” he said, identifying himself.

“Captain George Caesar, Commander, HMNAS *Amherst*,” Caesar chipped in, a moment later. “Who *are* you people?”

Lieutenant Sally Woods understood before Admiral Jackson, even though the strange accent that the natives of this timeline possessed; the American War of Independence hadn’t been launched in this timeline, or it had failed. The man spoke like a New Yorker, but there was more of the *Anglo* in his voice than any normal American would have had, or at least one who had never left the country.

“Admiral Christopher Jackson, Commander, Task Force India,” Jackson said. “United States Navy.”

Sally saw the puzzlement on the handsome semi-American’s face and smiled. “I beg your pardon,” Anderson asked. “The United States of *what*?”

Jackson’s eyes narrowed. “Why, the United States of America, of course,” he said.

The big black man, who seemed to command the battlecruiser, spoke in a dry tone. “The North American Union?”

Sally decided she'd better interrupt before anything unfortunate happened. "Sir, the United States doesn't exist here," she said.

Jackson rounded on her. "Are you certain?" He snapped. "What the hell could have happened to wipe us from existence?"

He didn't understand, Sally realised. Whatever had happened would be interesting, but irrelevant. If the British Empire had won the war – or, alternatively, the plan to make George Washington King had succeeded – then the United States simply didn't exist, at least as far as could be determined.

"Excuse me," the black Captain said. It spoke well of whoever they were that they had a multiracial crew. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Admiral Jackson gathered himself. "I honestly don't know what to say," he admitted. "Admiral, we seem to be rather lost. Sally?"

"Are you familiar with the concept of alternate universes?" Sally asked, directing the question at the two alien-British-American officers. They shook their heads. "We're from a different timeline, one where history proceeded down a different path to yours." She hesitated. "If you don't mind, what is the status of America?"

The two officers exchanged glances. "It's the North American Union, ever since the Colonial Parliaments were united in 1850," Anderson said. "Ah...madam, are you suggesting that you're from the future?"

Sally wished that it were that simple. "No, we're from a different dimension," she said. "Look, perhaps we could sit down and have a cup of tea."

Anderson laughed. "Yes, perhaps we could," he said. "George?"

"Right this way," Caesar said. "Madam, I don't believe that we've been introduced."

Sally held out her hand. "Lieutenant Sally Woods, Assistant Supply Officer and historian, *George Washington*," she said.

Anderson blinked. "Your ship is called the *George Washington*?" He asked. "Why?"

"It's something of a long story," Admiral Jackson said. Sally smiled; he seemed to

have recovered from his shock.”

“I think we have time,” Jackson said, as they entered the main body of the battlecruiser. “My stateroom is just down here.”

Anderson felt himself reel as the strangers explained their position and their point of origin. Now he had a moment to think, he understood the concept; the Admiralty studied endless campaigns of the British Empire, before it had become the United Empire, and counterfactual outcomes happened several times. There had even been a popular series of novels based on the concept, including a major collapse of the French Empire in 1800, when it had seemed like Louis something or other would have lost his throne. Instead, with the help of his Prime Minister, a genius called Napoleon, Louis had kept his throne, and Napoleon had built the Empire for him.

He shook his head. No one, as far as he knew, had developed a timeline that had included the original Thirteen Colonies becoming independent. The colossal blunder that had cost the rebels the war had been so bad that it had utterly destroyed the army that had been raised to face George III’s legions. The best thing that could be said about the rebellion, short-lived though it had been, was that it had convinced the King and Parliament to work towards home rule for the colonies – and eventually full equality within the empire.

“So, in your timeline the rebellion succeeded,” he said, after outlining the disaster that had cost the rebels the war. “What happened after that?”

Maggie O’Brien entered and smiled dazzlingly at them. Anderson waved her to a chair absently; the reporter would be able to put the experience into words for the public, when the censors cleared it. He smiled absently; the censors would probably not have the slightest idea what to do about it.

“The rebellion ended in victory, after the Battle of Yorktown,” Sally Woods said. Anderson nodded absently; Miss Woods and Miss O’Brien would probably get along like a house on fire. “The result was – eventually – the forming of a democratic government...”

“Unless you happened to be black, or a woman, or very poor,” Colonel Sir Benjamin Phillips injected. The British officer, one from the Alternate Britain, had been listening without commenting – until now. “You never freed the slaves

until after the civil war.”

Jackson held up a calming hand. “Carry on,” he said.

“We ended up fighting a civil war,” Sally admitted. She paused. “The origins of the war were multi-faceted, but in the end the Union was strengthened, leading to American power and its – our – rise to superpower status.” She frowned.

“Recently, we have been involved in a war against people who hate us for being much better than they are.”

“A simplistic argument,” Jackson injected. “The war on terror has many origins.”

Anderson took a deep breath, confused. “Terrorists?” He asked. “Like the Quebecois?”

“They’re causing trouble for you as well?” Woods asked. Anderson nodded; despite far better treatment than they could hope to receive in the French Empire, the Quebecois were a constant problem for the United Empire. “I think ours are worse.”

“I feel a headache coming on,” Anderson said. “Let’s move to the important question; what are you doing here?”

“I have no idea,” Jackson said, and he realised that his counterpart was telling the truth. “The...incident that brought us here, the strange UFOs, is well beyond our own technology.”

“But you can do so much we can’t,” Anderson said. “Those dragonfly aircraft, for example.”

“The helicopters,” Jackson said, naming them for his benefit. “That’s something else I don’t understand; by rights, you should be at least equal to us.”

“I think that they haven’t had as many wars as we’ve had,” Sally said. “Wars have certainly forced us forward.”

Anderson nodded. “So, you can’t get back,” he said, and saw them all nod grimly. “So, what now?”

“I honestly don’t know,” Jackson admitted.

Maggie spoke, her voice warm and innocent. “Why don’t you come with us?” She asked. “We have to raid the Falklands, but then you could come back to the North American Union with us.”

“The Falklands?” Jackson asked. “Why?”

“The French captured the islands a month ago,” Anderson said. “Our mission is to take them back.”

Jackson’s eyes narrowed grimly. “I think you’d better take a look at this,” he said, opening his briefcase. Anderson had expected papers to come spilling out, but instead Jackson pulled out a small device, which opened into a typewriter-like machine.

Caesar blinked. “What’s that?”

“A portable computing device,” Jackson said, an answer that left Anderson none the wiser. “Normally, we would be able to access satellites, an invisible field of electronic bandwidth that allows us to access information from around the globe. Connection to the *Washington* is piss-poor in your ship, but we can get the pictures.” He scowled. “Almost down to a full second for the pictures.”

He fiddled with the device a bit more, and then passed it over. Anderson stared at the image – it was the most perfect reconnaissance picture he’d seen – and then cursed. The looming shape of French superdreadnaughts, sitting within the Falkland Sound, was enough to spell disaster for his force.

“We might have gotten close enough for their guns to tear us to ribbons,” he said, and realised that the force had been very lucky.

“Perhaps,” Jackson said. “What are your orders if faced with superior forces?”

Anderson scowled. “Run for it,” he said. “Show them our heels and run. A ten thousand-strong force of Royal Marines, risked for nothing.” He scowled.

“They’re needed in the Caribbean, and we sent them here, on a wild goose chase.”

“I assume that you’re running on radio silence protocols,” Jackson said. Anderson took a moment to realise what Jackson had said. “They don’t know you’re here.”

Anderson made a face. “They know we’re here now,” he said. “They will have detected our signals to you, Admiral.”

“But you can wait here for a little bit,” Jackson said. He hesitated. “I can’t promise anything, but we might be able to help you.”

Anderson shook his head. “I don’t want to be caught here without steam-up by those superdreadnaughts,” he said.

“They haven’t left the Falklands,” Jackson said. “Admiral, the *George Washington* is coming here to meet you. We *will* see any attacking force even as it leaves Argentina.”

“New Spain,” Anderson corrected. Hope and fear mixed within his breast. “I have to tell Admiral Sir Joseph Porter something, Admiral.”

Jackson smiled. “Hold off for a moment,” he said. “Give us a couple of hours, and then we’ll see.” He paused, and glanced down at the laptop. “Admiral, the *George Washington* should be within sight now,” he said.

“That was quick,” Anderson said. He led the way up back onto the deck, his eyes scanning the horizon. A massive shape hung in the southeast, growing closer and closer all the time. “My God.”

“The aircraft carrier *George Washington*,” Jackson said, and there was an unmistakable note of pride in his voice. “Whatever else happens, we *will* warn you of any attacks coming your way.”

Anderson studied the massive ship as it grew closer, watching as it took on shape and form... and wondering why anyone would name their ship after *George Washington*? It simply didn’t make sense.

Chapter Six: Vive La France

Nelson's Bane/FS *Charles de Gaulle*

Mediterranean Sea (TimeLine B)

The last thing that Captain Duchamp, commanding officer of the merchant ship and troop transport *Nelson's Bane* had expected was a storm in the middle of the tranquil Mediterranean Sea. It had blown up out of nowhere, a wave of strange lights in the sky, and then a massive ship had materialised out of the storm, heading directly for the *Nelson's Bane*.

"Hard a-port," he shouted, losing his cigar in his panic. The massive ship was heading straight for a collision and the engines screamed, trying to move the huge ship in an impossible manoeuvre. The *Nelson's Bane* fishtailed – for a long moment Duchamp thought that they would collide with the mystery ship – and narrowly avoided a collision.

"Captain," his helmsman shouted. He was also his son; the *Nelson's Bane* operated as a family ship, or had before the Navy had conscripted them to transport troops from the Italian ports to Turkey.

"Shut up, Danton," he snapped. "What the hell was that ship?"

He directed his gaze towards the naval officer, a tall man who had introduced himself as Phillipe Lavich. He held himself with the bearing of a nobleman, which suggested one reason why he was on the *Nelson's Bane*, rather than serving on the battleships in Toulon, or Gibraltar, or even Calais.

"I have no idea, Captain," Lavich said, in a voice that oozed disrespect. The overbearing man flicked a small cigarette into the rubbish bin. "Perhaps we should ask them."

"The storm is fading," Danton said. His voice shook; sailors saw some strange things, but a ship appearing out of nowhere was something new.

"What a remarkable talent for stating the obvious you have," Lavich observed. Danton glared sullenly at him. "Look, it's coming about."

Duchamp forced down his annoyance and returned his gaze to the strange ship.

Up close, only a few hundred meters away, it was awesome. Strange objects, perhaps aircraft, sat on its decks; several aircraft-like machines were moving on the deck. With a clattering noise, one of them launched itself into the air, climbing higher and higher with each passing second.

“Wow,” Danton breathed.

“I’ve seen something like that in one of Leonardo Da Vinci’s sketchbooks,” Lavich said, too astonished to be haughty. “It was never made practical.”

Betraying your origins there, Duchamp thought. He hid his annoyance; annoying a nobleman was not wise, even for an independent sailor. Only noblemen got to see the horde of artefacts taken from French conquests around the globe.

“What do we do?” Duchamp asked, half-hoping that Lavich would know the answer. “That things bigger than a superdreadnaught.”

Lavich ignored him, peering through a pair of binoculars at the strange ship. “I can see its name,” he said. He paused. “FS *Charles de Gaulle*?”

“I’ve never heard of a *Charles de Gaulle*,” Duchamp said. “Who was he?”

Lavich shook his head. “I have no idea,” he said. “Still, it seems to be one of ours.”

Danton coughed. “Dad, what’s that flag?”

Lavich rounded angrily on the young man, and then caught sight of the tricolour flag himself. “I don’t know,” he said. He studied the ship for a long moment. “I think we’d better radio Toulon and ask for instructions.”

Duchamp shook his head. He was still master of his ship, whatever else happened. “If that ship wants to sink us, it can do so with ease,” he said. “I think we’d better do as it wants.”

Lavich snorted. “So far, it hasn’t asked us to do anything,” he pointed out. One of the strange aircraft broke away from the rising swarm and came towards the *Nelson’s Bane*. “I think we may be about to find out.” He paused. “Have a signal prepared, just in case.”

Contre-Admiral François Videzun let out a breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding when the smaller ship avoided their mad charge. The strange ship had appeared out of the ball of light that had struck the carrier...and then vanished. *No*, he realised; everything was different. It seemed to be almost...morning?

"Report," Captain Jean-Pierre Mauroy snapped. Videzun allowed himself a moment to be grateful that Mauroy was so unimaginative; someone with a genuine imagination might have been thrown by the...UFOs or whatever they were. Give Mauroy a crisis with written procedures, and he was fine; something completely unexpected, however...

"Sir, Captain, we have lost contact with the task force," Lieutenant Lagrange reported. The communications officer seemed pale. "I can't find the Americans at all."

Videzun smiled, taking command effortlessly. "You mean you cannot contact the *Washington*?" He asked. "Launch the SAR helicopters and the ready flight," he muttered to the CAG. "The Americans are gone?"

The roar of aircraft engines echoed through the bridge. "*Mon Captain*, I cannot reach *anyone*," Lieutenant Lagrange said. "Sir, there's no global internet, no radio stations except some that don't make sense...and that ship ahead of us."

"The sea lanes are very busy," the radar operator, Commander Hachay, said. "Sir, there's only that ship close by though, and only a handful of aircraft, none which match normal Pacific traffic."

"If we're in the Pacific," Picard murmured. "Admiral, where are we?"

The Navigation Officer worked his equipment. "I'm not sure," he admitted. "The GPS systems are gone. The beacons are gone. Radar imaging suggests...the Mediterranean?"

Videzun and Picard exchanged glances. "How can we have reached the Mediterranean?" Picard asked. "We were in the Pacific, only minutes ago."

"I have no idea," Videzun said. He smiled suddenly. "I think we should ask those people over there if they would like to talk to us." He raised his voice. "Order one of the helicopters to land on the strange ship and invite the captain to dinner."

"Yes, sir," Commander Boulanger, CAG, said. "A firm invitation?"

Videzun nodded. "Very firm," he said. "We'll even give them a very good dinner." He smiled. "Assuming they talk to us, of course."

The deck of the *Nelson's Bane* was perfect for the strange aircraft, settling down on the deck without any problems at all. Captain Duchamp was watching with his mouth open, but Commissioner Phillipe Lavich was watching with amusement – and determination. Despite his noble origins, he had been exiled from the Royal Court in Paris, simply for getting a serving wrench in trouble.

Low-bred bitch, he thought, knowing that his bastard son had destroyed any chance he might have had of rising to glory. Except...there was power in the mystery ship, he could feel it. Power, perhaps, even enough to push him back to the heights of high society. His parents, his family...all of them would have to prostrate themselves in front of him like Mohammedans to gain *his* favour, once the power was his.

The rotating blades came to a stop. Captain Duchamp held his idiot son back from running to the exotic aircraft at once. Lavich smiled inwardly; the average intelligence would have risen if the boy had been killed. He was certain that Duchamp's fat wife was in fact Italian, perhaps even from the Balkans. The hatch opened and a woman stepped out.

Lavich felt his mouth fall open and closed it with a snap. The woman was beautiful, long dark-brown hair cascaded down over a *very* tight-fitting suit. Danton stared openly; his father lowered his gaze. She stepped out onto the deck and saluted Duchamp, much to Lavich's irritation.

"Flight Lieutenant Belen Lefunte," she said, speaking in an oddly-accented version of French. Lavich, who spoke English and Russian as well as several other languages, couldn't place the accent. "I have been ordered to invite the Captain on board the *Charles de Gaulle*."

"That would be me," Duchamp said. He took the hand she extended and kissed it. Lavich noticed her surprise at the courtly gesture, but didn't have time to think it through. "Miss Belen, what *is* that ship?"

Lavich spoke rapidly to cover his annoyance. "I am Commissioner the Honourable Phillipe Lavich," he said. "I have been appointed as naval liaison to this ship."

Belen's gaze passed over his body, a curiously frank gaze. Lavich wasn't sure how he felt about it; Belen was clearly in a different category to the ladies of the Court. "You are from which navy?" She asked. "I don't recognise your uniform, sir."

"The French Navy, which serves Emperor Napoleon XI, long may he live," Lavich said, and Duchamp and his son echoed the heartfelt wish. The heir to the throne was an idiot; everyone knew that, despite the best efforts of the censors to conceal his gaffes. Lavich dreaded the day that his master would shuffle off the mortal coil – leaving Crown Prince Louis on the throne.

Belen's frank gaze was puzzled. "I don't understand," she murmured. "I think you'd both better come with me," she said. Lavich smiled and nodded. Duchamp demurred. "Captain, I insist..."

"It should be just me," Lavich said, before something unfortunate could happen. He placed all of his charm into his words. "This might impinge upon classified matters, ah...Miss Belen."

"*Lieutenant*," Belen said. "Coming?"

I'd pay money to follow you, Lavich thought, and followed her swaying behind back into her aircraft. It was small and neat, but some of the instruments were beyond his comprehension. Despite his spoiled upbringing, he knew that he had a fairly complete education – his father had beaten him when he had refused to learn – but the strange aircraft was far too complex to understand.

Belen shut the hatch and took the pilot's seat. "Hang on," she said, her voice all business-like. "We're about to make the hop over to the carrier."

Lavich didn't have time to wonder what she meant when the noise grew louder and the aircraft began to shake. "What kind of aircraft is this?" He asked, and then it struck him. There were *no* women at all in the French Navy. Was Belen a noblewoman, one spoiled enough to gain a piloting commission?

"It's a helicopter," Belen said, as the helicopter lifted off from the deck, heading over the sea towards the massive aircraft carrier. Lavich felt his mouth drop open as the carrier grew closer and closer; its decks were littered with strange aircraft, ones far deadlier than the fighters that he'd seen in Paris, protecting the capital from the British bombers.

The helicopter landed with a bump and Belen got up, adjusting the hatch to allow them to exit. Lavich's eyes followed her behind, but he said nothing, until she jumped out neatly. "Come with me," she said, and he followed her, his eyes staring around the massive ship. The crew stared back at him, their uniforms... odd.

"What are you people?" He asked, dazed. For the first time, he wondered if he was doing the right thing. "Where is this ship from?"

"France," Belen said. "The ship was launched nearly a decade ago."

"We have no such ship," Lavich said, as they entered the corridors. A thought struck him. "You're from the future?"

"What year is it?" Belen asked. "We were in 2009."

"So are we," Lavich said, feeling an insane urge to giggle. He forced it down; Belen probably thought that he was already half-mad. "Belen, what are you?"

Belen didn't answer, stopping in front of a cabin. Two grim-faced guards passed a strange metal rod over his body, and then waved them through. "The Admiral's in here," Belen said. "Good luck."

"I hope to see you again," Lavich said, before entering the room. A man looked up at him from a desk; a second man smiled at him from a chair. Neither man looked happy; both of them wore uniforms with the strange tricolour flag.

"I am Commissioner the Honourable Phillipe Lavich," he said. "I represent the interests of the French Navy."

The two men exchanged glances. "I am *Contre-Admiral* François Videzun," he said. The other man was left unnamed. "Commissioner, what year is this?"

"This is the year of our lord 2009," Lavich said. "Admiral, what are you?"

"I'm a Frenchman," Videzun said. An Englishman would have made a joke. "We seem to be rather lost."

The mild tone, Lavich realised, held more than a little desperation. "I don't understand," he said. "I serve the Emperor, but your pilot didn't understand."

The unnamed man coughed. “We’re in an alternate history,” he said, and smiled in delight. Lavich didn’t understand at all. “Commissioner, have you ever heard of Charles de Gaulle?”

Lavich shook his head. “No, sir,” he said. “I don’t understand.” He *hated* feeling if he was stupid. “What exactly has happened?”

“Ah, what about Napoleon?” The unnamed man asked. “If you serve an emperor...”

“Napoleon was the Prime Minister during the Age of Unrest,” Lavich said. “He served the Emperor; he kicked hell out of the Church and the nobles, binding them to serve the Emperor and the Empire.” He paused. History was not as studied in France as it might have been. “I really don’t know much more,” he said.

It took several hours of back-and-forth questioning before Videzun felt that he understood...and it wasn’t quite real, not to him. If the French Revolution had failed, then the Empire never had a period of unrest...and apparently was still a going concern in 2009, Alternate TimeLine.

Who would have thought that Picard would come in handy? Videzun thought, as he poured over the map, brought from the *Nelson’s Bane*. Even in relief, hardly revealing more than political boundaries, it revealed the three main powers and the four independent minor nations, it showed a French Empire that ruled a fair percentage of the world. From Norway to the Congo Border – apparently an independent Prussian state – France ruled, and then all of Lower South America, with the exception of Brazil.

“I don’t want to believe it,” he muttered to himself. The carrier’s complement of aircraft, mainly the Dassault Rafale and E-2 Hawkeye AEW aircraft, were probing the waters around them. He was now convinced that they were in the Mediterranean, which meant...what?

“We can’t get home,” Picard said, and Videzun watched as Lavich nodded. The alternate Frenchman had an attitude that had been knocked out of France before the rise of the National Front, which now didn’t exist. “What do we do now?”

“You come join us,” Lavich said. “I’ll sponsor you before the Court; this ship

alone could guarantee us victory against the British.”

Videzun thought quickly. Lavich, he was certain, intended to use them to boost his own status. In that case, he would not be eager to risk his gains by threatening the crew, and yet...how would the rest of the French Navy react to the alternate version of their history? Lavich had been shocked beyond words; he expected that the rest of the Court would feel the same.

“It’s a possibility,” Picard said, without committing himself. “Can we have a few moments to discuss it?”

Lavich nodded once, saluted, and headed outside to meet Flight Lieutenant Belen Lefunte. Videzun smiled to himself and gave her permission to spend the day showing him around the carrier, while calling Mauroy and Commander Hachay from the bridge.

“If this is a hoax, it’s astonishingly and impossibly detailed,” Picard said, as soon as the door was locked and two extra marines posted on guard. “Admiral?”

Videzun considered rapidly. “Commander Hachay?”

Passing the buck, he thought, as Commander Hachay considered. The radar operator had no lower-ranking officers to pass it down further to, just himself. “I think it’s the truth,” he said. “The radar systems all confirm that we’re in the Mediterranean, and the radar traces of aircraft in flight are nothing compared to what they were in our timeline.”

He paused. “In fact, the general volume of sea traffic is higher than in our timeline, and the volume of air traffic is far lower. There are no jumbo jets, just propeller-driven aircraft. At a general rule of thumb, they have World War Two-era technology, which means no jets, no missiles...and no atomics.”

“So we have something to bargain with,” Videzun said. “So...what are our options?”

“We have to make contact with France,” Picard said. Videzun smiled; he would not have expected anything else from the Political Commissioner. “We have a duty towards France, one that allows no compromise. We have the chance to place the world in their hands, Admiral; we should not waste it.”

Videzun nodded. “It’s not our France,” he said, “but it’s close enough. Think of

the Empire we could build.”

Mauroy coughed. “I hate to disagree,” he said. Videzun gaped; when was the last time that Mauroy had disagreed with him? “We should be returning home.”

“How?” Videzun asked. “Commander Hachay?”

“I haven’t had any opportunity to discuss the concept with any scientist from this timeline,” Commander Hachay said. “However, it seems fairly likely that they don’t have the ability to send us back. In general, they seem to be well behind us.”

“Advantage; us,” Videzun said. “That young man seemed quite impressed with Belen Lefunte. I wonder if she would agree to pump him for information.”

“She’s one of the most competent helicopter pilots we have,” Mauroy said. Videzun gazed at him, disturbed. It was a fine time to start showing that he had a brain after all. “She’s not Mata Hari.”

“She’s the best we have,” Videzun said. “Besides, I don’t think that sleeping with him will be necessary.” He smiled, his mind spinning over. “We could show them how to break the stalemate in Central Europe,” he said. “My God, we could even show them how to build proper fighter aircraft. If the British have the same technology as they do, and they must have, then some torpedo-carrying aircraft should *really* ruin their day.”

“I’ll have a word with the deck crew,” Mauroy said. “Some of them study past aircraft, merely as a hobby.” He paused. “There’s also the anti-ship missiles for the Chinese fleet.”

“Excellent,” Videzun said. “So...we have an Empire to win and an Emperor to impress.” He smiled. “How should we go about it?”

Chapter Seven: Making Choices

USS *George Washington*/HMNAS *Amherst*

South Atlantic (TimeLine B)

There was no such thing as a military democracy, of course. While the Russians *had* experimented with such a system, it was impractical on the level of a single ship, even one as large as the *George Washington*. However, Admiral Jackson had called the meeting, asking everyone to speak freely.

He spoke first, speaking to the entire room. “We are lost,” he said flatly, and the room let out a collective sigh. “Unless the...incident that got us here reverses itself, we will remain here for the rest of our lives. From the report of the handful of pilots who know anything about high-order physics, any form of controlled travel between dimensions is years off, perhaps decades. In effect, we are stuck.

“There’s no America here,” he continued. His voice fell slightly. “The United States never came into existence here. Instead, we have a British Empire, which is at war with the two other superpowers. Where do our loyalties lie?”

There were no demands that an inter-universal gate be constructed. They were all reasonable and practical people, not dreamers. “We have only a limited supply of food, of weapons, of countless practical pieces we need to support ourselves,” Jackson continued. “Even with the best will in the world, the technical base that exists here could not build a missile for the F-18s, or the Hawkeye radar systems. An alliance is utterly *essential* – the only question is with whom?”

“This...war is none of our business,” Commander Patrick O’Reilly, the Executive Officer, said. His Irish accent was dimmed. “We have a duty to America. If there’s an underground movement, then we have to support it to free America.”

“We are one ship,” Morrigan said. The Captain looked pale; Jackson knew that he’d left a wife on the other side of the looking glass. “We cannot take on an entire empire.”

“And do they want to be free?” Captain Kate Rusholme asked. “For all we know, the British Empire is a united democracy, not a million enslaved people screaming for freedom.”

Jackson nodded to Lieutenant Sally Woods. “It’s a democracy,” she said. She’d been studying the history books from the *Amherst*, trying to work out what had changed the world. “The British Empire was in the process of evolving that way when the World Wars broke out. In this timeline...they had the time to do that without the pressures of a global war.”

Commander Travis Reece, Supply Officer, snorted. “Exactly *what* happened?” He asked. “Don’t bother with an info dump; just give us the basics.”

Sally smiled at him. “Long Island did,” she said. “Historically, as the British moved into New York, Washington managed to escape with the intact American Army. In this timeline...he was trapped; General Howe moved faster and the army was trapped, hammered, and forced to surrender.”

“Bugger me,” Colonel Sir Benjamin Phillips said. The British officer had been studying the history of British campaigns as long as he had been alive. “So, what happened?”

“It broke the back of the revolution,” Sally said. She sighed. “In the rest of the year, instead of Saratoga, the British occupied the rest of the colonies, cut the remains of Congress up and apart, and convinced Congress to surrender. The French and Spanish backed off from supporting the rebellion...and the dream of American independence was over.

“But everything had changed anyway,” she continued. “I wish I had access to proper history books; these are good on the basics, but limited on the detail we *need*. In 1778; the colonial parliaments became operative, with home rule powers. In 1779; the Quebecois received limited autonomy. In 1780; there was a massive expansion into Indian lands, ending most of the Indian nations. In 1812-1820, there was a great war, fixing the borders between the French-held Spanish American lands and the British colonies. And in 1850, the Dominion of the North American Union was created – and independence became a right of the American colonies.

“These are just names and dates,” she said. “These people...are part of a United Empire, one that has Australia, India, South Africa...and Britain itself. They don’t want to be free; *freedom* to them means being part of the United Empire.”

“Strange,” Jackson said. “So, any other suggestions?”

“We could set up base somewhere, perhaps an island somewhere,” O’Reilly

suggested, rather desperately. “Sir, I’m uncomfortable with the thought of an empire, even one that includes Ireland.”

“Perhaps *especially* one that includes Ireland?” Morrigan asked dryly. O’Reilly nodded. “Commander Reece?”

“That is impossible,” Reece said flatly. The supply officer held up a PDA and waved it around grimly. “We were preparing for a long deployment, so Guam gave us full loads and we picked up more in Japan, but we are dependent upon supply runs from somewhere habitable. Even assuming that we could find an empty island big enough to support all six thousand and five hundred of us, we would be unable to support ourselves.”

O’Reilly sighed. “I don’t know what they’ll make of us either,” he said. “So, what do we do?”

“We have to make alliances,” Jackson said, speaking as firmly as he could. “The choice seems to be between the British, or the French.”

“Bearing in mind that we’re right next to a force of British ships,” Morrigan added thoughtfully. “They may be primitive, but those armour-piercing shells were designed to shoot through heavier armour than we have.”

Captain Kate Rusholme, the Head of the Medical Department, spoke gently. “So far, it hasn’t really sunk in that we’re...lost,” she said. Her voice was quiet; she’d been a good doctor before being transferred to management. “Once it sinks in that friends, relatives, wives and husbands are all gone, there will be trouble.”

“Morale is not what it could be already,” Morrigan commented. It was his ship; he knew the general attitude. “If we had a mission.”

“Unless anyone can come up with a valid objection, I intend to join the British United Empire,” Jackson said. He smiled; from what he’d seen, the British Empire was the most...democratic and it *did* include the territory of the United States, after all. “Comments?”

Morrigan spoke next, as the second-ranking officer. “I second the motion,” he said, with a wry smile. Normally, the Admiral would never call for a vote. “I think we have no choice at all, sadly.”

O’Reilly coughed. “I confess that I am uncomfortable with this,” he said.

“However, in the absence of any other choice...”

Jackson waited as the others spoke. Kate Rusholme elaborated on how much the medical department could do for the United Empire. Reece elaborated on the dangers of losing their few missiles and other weapons. Jackson listened with interest.

“We don’t have a complete idea of the local tech base,” Reece said. His grey hair gave his face an impression of age, if not dignity. “However, from what we’ve seen, they seem to be somewhere around 1930ish. In effect, that means no more missiles – they might be able to produce bullets for the cannons and the close-in weapons – and almost certainly no more vital electronic equipment.”

“We’ll have to gear down, help them to develop,” Jackson said. “That, if nothing else, should give us a bargaining chip. However...we have a final problem.” He had their attention; he chose his words carefully. “Our new friend, the semi-American Admiral Anderson, was ordered to recover the Falkland Islands from the French occupation force, although what the French are doing as a viable military power I don’t know.”

“Apparently the monies they saved from not taking part in the War of Independence allowed them to remain solvent long enough to solve their most irritating problems,” Sally said. “It’s been quite extensively studied, according to that cute reporter on the *Amherst*, but she didn’t have any of the books.”

“And I presume they don’t have CDs or micro drives,” Jackson said. “We can help them to recover the Falklands, seeing the French seem to have planned it as an ambush for Anderson’s force.”

Captain Sonja Robertson smiled evilly. “They have nine of their superdreadnaughts, sitting in the Falklands Sound, waiting for an attack,” she commented. “At a guess, they planned to sucker the British force, then chase them until the British were sunk or the British outraced them.”

“It’s a United Empire fleet,” Sally said absently. “Only one of the ships is British.”

“They must work better together than NATO ever did,” Jackson said. “I propose to join their attack. All those in favour?”

“We need to be careful,” O’Reilly said. “What – exactly – will our weapons do to

an armoured superdreadnaught?”

Commander Thomas Henderson smiled. He'd been thinking about it. “A bunker-buster will damage one, I think,” he said. “Even if the armour can stand off a Penguin AGM-119 or a Harpoon from a helicopter, a guided bomb could fall right down their smokestacks, or even use a bunker-buster to just punch right through.”

“Design me an operations plan,” Jackson ordered. “Bill?”

Morrigan smiled. “This should be interesting,” he said. “I'm looking forward to meeting the other Americans.”

“I think that this is particularly interesting,” Sally Woods said. Sharon Green found it impossible to concentrate; thinking about the sheer *distance* between her and her office, the people she was supposed to be filing daily reports to, was killing her.

“They're going to give me the sack,” she said softly. Her mind spun. “All those years of clawing my way to the top and I'm going to get the sack.”

Sally held out a hand and squeezed Sharon's shoulder. “Now you're being stupid,” she said wryly. “They can't sack you if you're not around to sack.”

“What the hell am I going to do here?” Sharon demanded. Her voice had risen; she hated it when she was so shrill. “What's there for me?”

“I don't know, yet,” Sally said. As always, she tried to keep her voice level. “If you help with the history project, you might be able to link up with the reporter on the *Amherst*.”

“There's a reporter with that crew?” Sharon asked, unbelieving. “What's she like?”

“Nice young Irish girl,” Sally said. “She works for the *Irish Times*. Perhaps they'll take you on.”

“I used equipment that they haven't heard of in this century,” Sharon said, sliding

back into depression. “I don’t know how to use a typewriter, you know.”

“You’ve used a computer,” Sally said, waving a hand at the computers in the room. “You must be able to type.”

“It’s not the same,” Sharon said. She stood up, pacing around the room. “Sally, what am I going to do?”

“Live,” Sally said flatly. “You’re going to climb to the top of the new reporting business here. Do you know; they hardly have television here. If you start a broadcasting service, you’ll corner the market. Start the Internet up, and you’ll *really* corner the market.”

Sharon felt her mouth twist into a smile. “I could make money out of this,” she said. “Of course...”

She laughed. “Hell, do you know how many eBooks there are in my collection?” She asked. “I could publish them all, and then...I could place my name on them. *The Great War; Walk in Hell*, by Sharon Green.”

“I think that someone here will notice,” Sally said. “There are dozens of Turtledove fans on this ship.” She chuckled. “Still, you could make a mint printing them. Perhaps if you build a better printer...”

“That alone would make them grateful,” Sharon said. “God, I miss my system back home already.”

“I’ve made my decision anyway,” Colonel Sir Benjamin Phillips said. Admiral Jackson lifted an eyebrow. “I request permission to transfer to Britain as soon as possible.”

“I don’t understand,” Jackson said thoughtfully. “We have agreed to support them, at least as far as assisting them in attacking the Falklands. Why do you want to leave?”

“I think I can be of more use in Britain,” Phillips said seriously. “I don’t know for sure, but I have a nasty feeling that their war-fighting technology is at 1914 levels, simply because of the failure of *any* of the superpowers to produce a concrete victory. From what Admiral Anderson said, the war has stalemated.”

Jackson paused a moment. “Perhaps you’re right,” he said. “However, I think that aiding the Falklands comes first, don’t you?”

“I’m sure that the Admiralty would agree,” Phillips said. He smiled. “It’s just that I am a British citizen, and so are my men – wherever they are – and my duty is to Britain. King-Emperor George X sounds so much more interesting than the crop of media-aware buggers back home.”

Jackson frowned. “They might refuse to listen to you,” he said.

Phillips frowned back. “Admiral, with all due respect, what would you have done if you’d ended up in a universe where the Confederate States of America had won the American Civil War?”

Jackson smiled, recognising the source of his own discontents. He didn’t want more unpredictable elements out of his control. “I think that Modern Americans would head at once to join the United States,” he said. “What do we have in common with slave owners?”

“Even the men from Alabama and the deep south?” Phillips asked dryly.

“I see your point,” Jackson snapped. “Very well; you may go. Once the Falklands battle is over, you may transfer any way you want.”

The invitation to visit the *George Washington* had not been unexpected. Vice-Admiral Felix Anderson had spent the waiting period wondering just how he was going to explain everything to Admiral Sir Joseph Porter, let alone the First Sea Lord. The flight in the fantastic helicopter had distracted him from considering the prospect of a court martial in the future – not reporting the encounter with the *George Washington* might constitute treason.

“Welcome aboard,” Admiral Jackson said, as soon as he climbed out of the helicopter. The massive flight deck of the *George Washington* was covered with aircraft, being prepared for a mission. Dozens of crewmen, both male and female, were working on the deck – and he blinked at the revealing outfits worn by some of the women.

“You have women on this ship?” He asked, astonished. The Royal North American Navy didn’t have women on their ships. Maggie O’Brien might be the

first one in years. “Working as crewwomen, not guests?”

“Of course,” Jackson said, puzzled. “Don’t you?”

Anderson shook his head. “No, we don’t,” he said. “How does it work?”

“It took us some time, but we got used to it,” Jackson said. “Women have some advantages over men for this kind of work, and it doubles the base population that we can call upon.”

Anderson nodded absently, trying to grasp the sheer size of the *George Washington*. The massive carrier was more of a floating city than a military ship. “How many people do you have?” He asked suddenly. “What are you going to do with them?”

“We have nearly seven thousand people,” Jackson said, as they entered the command tower and walked through strange metal corridors. He led the way into a briefing room. “Would you be interested in help recovering the Falklands?”

Anderson nodded. “Yes, that would be helpful,” he said dryly. “Is this ship really powerful enough to take on nine superdreadnaughts?”

“Oh, yes,” Jackson said. He tapped a hidden button and a massive screen on the wall illuminated. Anderson had seen the first experimental video machines, and he’d visited countless cinemas, but the pictures on the screen were fantastically detailed. Tactical icons, including nine marked SUPERDREADNAUGHT, were scattered around Falkland Sound.

“Bastards,” Anderson muttered. The positioning was diabolical; if his force had gotten within gunnery range, the battlecruisers – with their lighter armour – would have been hammered. “Can you handle them?”

“Not eager to go toe-to-toe with them?” Jackson asked. “The aircraft can take them out.”

Anderson stared at him, refusing to acknowledge the possible insult to his bravery. “Aircraft have never been successful against ships,” he said. “The entire history of aviation includes not one single airstrike that was successful against a ship.”

“It does in our timeline,” Jackson said. “We have missiles capable of hammering

the superdreadnaughts, perhaps even destroying them.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Anderson said. He narrowed his eyes. “What’s the price?”

Jackson met his eyes. “Food for my men,” he said. Anderson smiled as Jackson swiftly changed the subject. “The enemy have dug in here, here and here,” he said, pointing to locations on the map. “Once we take out their ships and the airfield, you can land; Colonel Sir Benjamin Phillips can go with you, using a laser targeting device.”

“You can just...blast the obstacles out of the way?” Anderson asked. “A Marine invasion has to be quick and stealthy. I can’t afford to waste many of them.” He paused. “Hell, I can’t afford to waste *any* of them.”

“I understand,” Jackson said seriously. “I can’t afford losses either. Take my word for it; we can hit any target on the ground, and the French aircraft won’t get close enough to damage my craft.”

Anderson thought about the strange craft he’d seen flying overhead and nodded. He believed it; that craft had seemed like nothing on Earth. “You can see all this as it happens, then?” He asked. Jackson nodded. “In that case, if we sneak up on the Falklands tonight, we can launch the attack tomorrow.”

Jackson shook his head. “Can you give us a day?” He asked. “I need to make all of the preparations.” He paused. “I’d love to insert a crewman onto the Falklands, just to check the recon images, but I don’t have a way to do that.”

Anderson lifted his eyebrows. “Not even one of your...helicopters?”

“Too much chance of it being seen,” Jackson said. Anderson frowned; the Falklands were tiny, but not *that* tiny. Still, he hoped that Jackson knew what he was doing. If the Falklands remained in French hands, it could change the entire fabric of the war.

“We launch the attack in two days, then,” Anderson said. “Will you be wanting to send some of your people to the *Amherst*?”

Jackson nodded. “And some of them to the *Washington*,” he said. “We had better find out all the little culture shocks before it’s too late.”

Chapter Eight: Paris Court

Bourbon Palace

Paris, France (TimeLine B)

The Bourbon Palace was the centre of the Bourbon Empire, an empire that was a French empire in all, but name. Frenchmen held the highest posts; Frenchmen were the first-class citizens everywhere, closely followed by their Spanish and Italian fellow citizens. Prussians and Indians from New Spain only had powerful positions in their home countries.

Prime Minister Vincent Pelletier stepped inside the centre of the Bourbon Palace, the fortress at the centre of Paris. The Crown Prince and many of the crowned heads of Europe – it was not for nothing that Emperor Napoleon XI's titles included King of Kings – lived within the Palace, a vast inbred family. Louis the Great had created the aristocratic system, Pelletier suspected, to keep the nobles under control – *his* control. After the example of Napoleon – the Corsican who had become Prime Minister – all Prime Minister's had to be from the commoners; the middle class that handled most of the business of the Empire.

“Excuse me,” the guard said. Pelletier didn't protest; it wasn't often that a low-born guard from the Emperor's Own had the chance to manhandle a noble, and they tended to make the most of it. Pelletier had designed most of the layers of protection around Emperor Napoleon himself; no one wanted the Crown Prince to inherit the throne.

“There's my sword and my dagger,” Pelletier said, and allowed the guard to remove them. Challenging the Prime Minister to a duel wasn't permitted, but it had happened on occasion, particularly during the rule of weak emperors.

“You may proceed,” the guard said. Pelletier bowed once and stepped inside the inner palace, the most-protected place in the Empire. Below Paris, safe from the British bombers that raided Paris on occasion, the entire Civil Service worked, running the empire. Above Paris, the Emperor himself lived, protected by the unspoken agreement not to try to kill the members of the Royal Family.

The great hall opened in front of him, the civilian throne room. A young princess jumped off the civilian throne, a throne fully as ornate as the one reserved for formal occasions, and smiled guiltily. Pelletier smiled at her; a princess had

nothing to look forward to, but an arranged marriage to a prince, perhaps even an Englishman or a Russian.

“Your Highness,” he said gravely, and bowed.

“Prime Minister,” Princess Jasmine said, and curtsied back. Pelletier smiled; she was the product of a marriage between a Prince of the Blood and a Turkish Princess, binding the empire closer together. She was nine years old; soon enough, she would be betrothed to someone. Her lightly-darkened skin and strong cheekbones promised great beauty in the future.

“You are excused,” Pelletier said. Technically, he supposed that he should have rebuked her for sitting on the throne, but he didn’t think that it was really that important. Jasmine ran out of the throne room, and Pelletier headed into the inner *inner* rooms, the ones that no one outside the Bourbon Palace knew existed.

“You are expected,” the guard said, as he entered. “You may proceed.”

Pelletier nodded and stepped through into his Emperor’s inner sanctum. Unlike the rest of the Bourbon Palace, it was Spartan, designed for work, not self-indulgence. The only sign of debauchery – the debauchery that British propaganda swore blind happened inside – was a decanter of red wine, sitting on the side of the room beside a large loaf of bread. In public, the Emperor was something of a pig; in private, he liked to eat sparingly.

“Your Majesty,” Pelletier said, and went to one knee. He’d been told by the previous emperor that a lecherous emperor had started the custom, although popular rumour put the blame on the first Napoleon. “Lord of Europe, defender of the faith...”

“Not in private, please,” the Emperor said. Pelletier rose to his feet, taking the chair that the Emperor indicated, and studied the monarch. The Emperor looked weaker than he had been before, his face was paler than Pelletier liked to see. “You have served me for so long, ever since the Civil Service.”

Pelletier bowed from his seat. He had joined the Civil Service after passing the heavy barrage of tests from the Empire-wide examinations. The then Crown Prince had picked him out to serve as his assistant – and then Prime Minister, once he had reached the throne. They were friends – or as close as they could be friends, given the disparity in their positions.

“How fares the war?” The Emperor asked. His thin angular face, more stern than handsome, frowned. His eyes were dimmer than they had been, Pelletier noted with alarm. “Has the mad dog abandoned the war?”

Pelletier coughed. It had been Tsar Nicolas XX who had started the war, with his paranoid belief that the French and English were conspiring against him. In Alaska, in Iran, in Turkey, in China...the Tsar’s belief in his own infallibility – and the plots against him – had sent thousands of men to their deaths.

“I’m afraid not, *Mon Emperor*,” he said. Emperor Napoleon XI might not want titles in private, but he deserved them. He tried to put some enthusiasm into his voice. “We gained two miles in Poland.”

The Emperor laughed harshly. “Two miles,” he said. “A tiny amount of land, just enough to bury the dead. I don’t suppose that the diplomatic approach has worked?”

“Only if you want to give up Turkey, join him in war against Britain, and surrender a chunk of Prussia,” Pelletier said. “He still believes that the war can be won.”

“Giving up East Prussia, perhaps even part of the Germanys, would really annoy the German Princes,” the Emperor mused. “It might be worthwhile, just for that alone.”

Pelletier coughed. The confused noble system might no longer have the parasitic effect that it had had before Napoleon and Louis the Great, but there were still hundreds of noblemen who were descended from the German princes who had been absorbed into the Empire. In actuality, they were hardly distinguishable from the French or Spanish nobles, but they persisted in claiming special status in Germany because of it. Some of them had *never* set foot in Germany –and faced death if they ever went near the Prussian Congo – but they would howl if the Russians were given the territory.

“That was a joke,” the Emperor said mildly. Pelletier sighed. “No, we cannot back down. What about the Falklands plan?”

“So far, the British haven’t responded, at least as far as we can see,” Pelletier said. “The Minister of Marine, however...”

“A fig for him,” the Emperor said. “I know what the old woman keeps telling me;

can't risk a battle, better to keep the British guessing. He's been working on submarines for ages, and there hasn't been any result, has there?"

"The attempt to build a long-range submarine hasn't yet worked," Pelletier said. "It's a technical matter; fuelling the craft is a problem."

"I'm sure it is," the Emperor said. "How much more appropriations does he want?"

"Several million Napoleons," Pelletier said reluctantly. "With additional testing in the Aegean Sea..."

"We should be using the Black Sea, now that we took Sevastopol," the Emperor said. Pelletier shrugged; the battle to land a massive force at Sevastopol and march to Moscow had been a partial success. Sevastopol was now French territory, but the Russians had trapped the force in the Crimea, preventing them from moving any further. Only French naval superiority had saved the twenty thousand Frenchmen dug into the ruins of the city.

"All the testing locations are in the Aegean Sea," Pelletier said. "They might produce something worthwhile."

"It won't be long before Indochina falls," the Emperor said. French Indochina had been ignored by the British – the massive and confused seven-way war in China had kept them from looking at Indochina, but there was no denying that the colony was horrifyingly vulnerable. "And, of course, we're cut off from New Spain."

"That's not quite accurate," Pelletier reminded him, starting to get very worried. Were the Emperor's responsibilities starting to get the better of him? "We do slip convoys through."

"Bah," the Emperor commented. Pelletier nodded; with the British Home Fleet in the United Kingdom itself, and the Royal North American Navy in New Orleans, Halifax and New York, slipping a convoy through to New Spain was difficult. Fortunately, Viceroy Cortez was extremely competent – and New Spain was fairly self-sufficient. "We need a silver bullet."

"Then we have to keep investing in new technologies," Pelletier pointed out. "My Emperor; we have little choice."

“I am aware of that,” the Emperor said. He was, Pelletier knew; the Emperor understood the vast problems in paying for the massive battle fleet and equally massive army that the empire needed. The Russian hordes might not have *quite* the technology of their French enemies, but there were so many more of them... and the British had an easy lead in shipbuilding.

Nation of shopkeepers, he thought grimly. “We could always open up a new front in Ethiopia, or make an alliance with the Prussians in the Congo.”

“They would hardly go for it,” the Emperor said. “I’m surprised that they haven’t joined the British.”

Pelletier understood. The Prussians, the descendants of those who had managed to gain their independence in 1945, were pushed up against the French in the north, and the British in the south. With Ethiopia to the east, he had expected the Prussians to engage in a land-grab – except Ethiopia was hardly unarmed. The black Africans, determined to keep their independence, had built a formidable army and an equally formidable transport network.

“They’re probably waiting to see who loses the war,” Pelletier said, knowing that the war would probably go on for years. “If we lose, they’ll head north. If the British lose, they’ll head south.”

“Bastards,” the Emperor said. “Is there anything else of urgent priority?”

“There was an odd report from Toulon,” Pelletier said. “It was strange; a report of a strange ship being sighted in the Mediterranean. It was signed by Commissioner Phillipe Lavich, whom you might remember.”

“Ah, the boy who got Mimi in trouble,” the Emperor said. Mimi had once been a popular – and lowborn – dancer, until Lavich had seduced her and knocked her up. His family had agreed to support the child – if Lavich went off to the most obscure placement the Ministry of Marine could find. “What did he have to say?”

“Only that the ship would be visiting Toulon later, and that it was of the utmost importance that it be kept secret,” Pelletier said. “Given the young man’s character...”

“You were going to ignore it?” The Emperor asked. “Even Lavich wouldn’t risk incurring the wrath of the entire Ministry of Marine.”

“Not exactly,” Pelletier said. “I gave orders for Admiral Rancourt – that’s the station commander at Toulon – to conduct his own evaluation of the...incident.”

“Good thinking,” the Emperor said. “If the Honourable Lavich is wasting time, Admiral Rancourt will see to it, and to his punishment. I won’t intervene.”

“It is my pleasure to obey,” Pelletier said, and meant it. Some Emperors had always acted to save noblemen from the consequences of their own actions, but Emperor Napoleon XI knew better. “I shall await his report with interest.”

The Emperor nodded. “I have to look good for the meeting with the German noblemen,” he said, as his dresser came in. The young woman was carrying a pile of silk clothes that were almost as big as she was. “I think we’ll have to talk again later.”

“There’s been no major change,” Pelletier said. “I’ll inform you at once if there is such a change.”

The Emperor grinned. “Feel free to interrupt the meeting with the princelings,” he said. “After a few minutes, I’m going to be praying for a major emergency. Speaking of which, is the Pope behaving himself?”

“He has had prayers for our victory preached in every church across the Empire,” Pelletier said. The two French divisions in Italy, near the Vatican, kept the Pope honest – and on side. “Apart from losing his right to send Bishops to Quebec, he hasn’t had much to howl about anyway. Besides, he would be delighted if the Russian Church was squashed flat.”

“A shame,” the Emperor agreed. “We had a lot of spies moving through Quebec. Oh well, it’ll keep the Pope in the right state of mind for obeying me and my people.”

Pelletier stood and bowed deeply. With the dresser in the room, it was no time for forgetting court etiquette. “I will call later today,” he promised, bowed again, and accepted his dismissal. The Emperor winked at him as he left the room.

Toulon Harbour

France (TimeLine B)

The sheer size of the opportunity that had dropped itself in his lap hadn’t really

occurred to Commissioner Phillipe Lavich until the *Charles de Gaulle* drew near to Toulon. The massive French flags that hung from the conning tower, both the *real* flag and the alternate flag, had been enough to convince the patrolling aircraft that they were friendly, along with the jet fighters that had flown over Toulon. The *Nelson's Bane* had gone ahead, warning Admiral Rancourt of their approach.

“Those are the biggest ships you have?” Admiral Videzun asked, as the three dreadnaughts slid past, an honour guard and a not-so-subtle reminder of French power. “A handful of missiles would sink them all within moments.”

Lavich smiled. He liked Videzun; the strange Admiral was a kindred spirit. “The British and the Russians do not have missiles,” he said. “With your help, we will get them first.”

Videzun shook his head. “Missiles will take years, at least to build anything effective,” he said. “Random bombardment of Britain and Moscow might be possible within a year or two, but only if your tech base is as advanced as we think it is.”

Lavich refused to be deflated. Opportunity was singing; he could hear it calling to him. “If half your tales of the wars in your timeline are true, then the war could be over sooner than we thought,” he said. “Thanks to our bargain...”

“Provided you keep your side of it,” Videzun said. They’d struck a bargain last night, one for shared power and influence. Lavich, who knew the ropes of the French Court, and Videzun, who controlled the fantastic powerhouse of an aircraft carrier and the knowledge it had brought with it. The idea alone would be worth thousands of Napoleons.

“I will,” Lavich said. He closed his eyes; he might even rise to Prime Minister – or, more likely, a high-ranking position in Crown Prince Louis’s Court. Louis had been a friend of his, as far as the Crown Prince could have friends. *He* had understood minor irregularities such as an unexpected pregnancy, even if no one would dare trust him with the governing of the country. He grinned suddenly; his relationship with Flight Lieutenant Belen Lefunte was proceeding nicely.

I’m sure that she will be better in bed than that silly dancer, he thought coldly, and smiled. He could afford to wait; with the *Charles de Gaulle* and her crew, his position would soon become impregnable.

Videzun smiled back. “I think that it’s time to go make the acquaintance of

Admiral Rancourt,” he said, as the *Charles de Gaulle* drew to a halt, just outside the main harbour. For the first time, Videzun looked...discomforted. “It’s nothing like what it was in my world,” he murmured.

The harbour was the same, Videzun realised, as the helicopter spiralled over the French fleet and headed towards the city. It was the city that was different; the city and the harbour facilities that existed here – and didn’t exist in the original timeline. Picard had explained the concept as best as he could, but Videzun hadn’t really understood.

It got really bad when he started to talk about the trousers of time, he thought, and smiled grimly to himself.

“Down there,” Lavich said, pointing to a massive building that could even be seen from their height. He’d been worried that some enterprising anti-aircraft gunner would try to shoot down the helicopter, but the British had apparently never tried to raid Toulon. The Mediterranean was a French lake, with heavy guns mounted in Spain and Morocco.

“Taking us down,” Belen Lefunte said. Videzun smiled again; she had been more than happy to spend time with Lavich, pumping him for information. He’d hoped that Lavich would be willing to talk more about the French Government of this timeline, but beyond the fact that the government was a monarchy, he hadn’t been clear.

“That’s Admiral Rancourt,” Lavich said. A tall elderly man was watching as the helicopter made the final approach to the lawn, and touched down neatly on the grass. Lavich scrambled for the hatch and stepped out; Videzun followed him. He’d worn his dress uniform for the meeting, even though Admiral Rancourt would never recognise it.

“I see that you do have a good reason for the emergency,” Admiral Rancourt said. Videzun concealed a smile; the Admiral spoke like a parody of an aristocrat from a movie set in pre-revolutionary France. The odd accent he’d noted before was stronger, more pronounced. “I assume that you have a good explanation?”

Videzun chuckled and started to explain. “We have come to help France end the war victoriously,” he concluded.

“You came from a world where France fell to a minor power?” Admiral Rancourt asked, as soon as the story had finished. “And yet – you have those aircraft and that...*thing*.”

He waved a hand at the helicopter. “The problem is; everyone else has them too,” Videzun said wryly. “In this timeline, you would be the only ones...”

Admiral Rancourt frowned. “I have served on battleships for all of my life,” he said. “Those...puny aircraft can sink one?”

“Oh, yes,” Videzun said. “In my time, two battleships, caught without air cover, were sunk within moments.” He paused for dramatic effect. “The aircraft that sunk the two ships, Admiral, are well-within the technology you have now. With some help from us, you could build them and deploy them...and gain a permanent advantage. Admiral, you – we – would own the world.”

Chapter Nine: Fight for the Falklands

Falkland Island

Pacific Ocean (TimeLine B)

Commandant Benoit lit his cigarette with a flick of his lighter, stepping outside his commandeered house in Stanley, examining the security arrangements around the British city. ‘City’ was really too good a name for it, he knew; the British population of the islands was barely larger than two thousand, at most. It had been almost undefended – thanks to a treaty from a hundred years ago – and the conquest had been easy...and almost civilised.

He shook his head. Enough people – both Marines and sailors – had seen the strange aircraft to alarm the entire town. He’d informed the natives that the strange aircraft was from France, but the truth was that he had no idea where it had come from. It had barely registered on the radar set they’d set up on the hill.

“*Mon Commandant*,” Colonel Dubois said, as Benoit stepped inside the centre of administration. The former Governor’s House in the Falklands, a fairly standard example of British colonial government, was primitive – the Falklands hadn’t really been a priority for development. A single portrait of Queen Victoria – no one had bothered to update it when the lady had died – hung over the ornate desk.

Benoit smiled. In France, when an Emperor died, there was a mad flurry to replace all of the portraits, stamps, coins – except for the gold Napoleons – and everything else. The sedate Falkland natives seemed to care nothing for the outside world.

“Have there been any other sightings?” He asked, once they’d passed through the tedious protocol. “Did the Viceroy have any reply for us?”

Dubois shook his head. Viceroy Cortez, the highest-ranking Spaniard within the Empire, had been sent an urgent note via the undersea cable. “He hasn’t replied,” Dubois said. “Perhaps it was one of ours.”

“I very much doubt it,” Benoit said. “If it had been, would there not be a string of aircraft with more primitive versions of its...engines? There’s a difference between the Louis fighter and the Foch, but they’re clearly from the same design period. The strange aircraft we saw...”

Dubois inclined his head. "I have taken the liberty of keeping the Marines on full alert," he said. "Unfortunately, the fighters and seaplanes cannot fly at night."

"I know that," Benoit snapped. Night-fighting had been a priority, but until they improved their navigation, it would be impossible to fly planes in the dark. "Was there any update on the signals interceptions?"

"Nothing new," Dubois said. He tapped the map. "The stations in New Spain triangulated it to here" – he pointed at a location nearly a hundred miles from the Falklands – "but so far there hasn't been anything new."

"So there's a British force nearby, strange aircraft, and...what?" Benoit asked. "If the aircraft was British, the same argument about development would apply, would it not?"

"I believe so," Dubois said. "Commodore Lemieux was wanting to take the superdreadnaughts out hunting."

Benoit scowled. "We have more important things to worry about," he said. "If the superdreadnaughts do go hunting, without knowing what they're up against, the British might sneak in and retake the Falklands. You know how hard this place is to take if it's defended well."

"We took it with ease," Dubois pointed out.

"The British didn't fortify the islands," Benoit said. "Give us a couple of weeks, and we'll have them fortified ourselves – *then* the superdreadnaughts can go hunting."

"Yes, sir," Dubois said. "Unfortunately, Commodore Lemieux was pointing out that the Admirals in Panama might recall the force if the British ships don't show up soon."

"Bloody armchair admirals," Benoit snapped. "*Merde!*"

"Yes, sir," Dubois said. "Sir..."

Benoit ignored him. "It takes *time* to move ships around," he snapped. "It's not like we can magically transport ships from here to Panama, is it?"

"No, sir," Dubois said. "However, it's not like nine superdreadnaughts could

survive a battle with the full weight of the British fleet, if they risked sending it down here.”

“Bastards,” Benoit snarled. “As far as I can tell, all this island has are fish and sheep,” he said. “Is it really worth all this effort?”

“Sir, I...” Dubois began. A screech echoed across the sky, the noise of a howling god. “Sir...”

“It’s back,” Benoit said. Both men ran to the window, staring into the clear sky. The strange aircraft was back...and this time it had brought friends. Even as the air raid sirens started to howl, they were over the islands.

Captain Rupert Potter banked the F-18 directly over the islands, examining the results from the recon pods and comparing them to the images he’d taken earlier. The other aircraft spread out, taking up positions to evade ground anti-aircraft fire...that he suspected would be ineffective against them.

“All right, people, let’s do this,” he said. The images – sent back to him from the CAG – matched; the strange alternate Frenchmen hadn’t improved their defences any since the first recon flight. The three airfields were where they were before – not as if they could be moved – and the nine superdreadnaughts lurked in Falklands Sound. “Betty, Arnold, you’re on SEAD – not that that will be needed here. Everyone else, take your targets...and attack.”

The F-18’s screamed across the Sound. The massive shapes of the superdreadnaughts grew rapidly below them; bursts of black smoke far below them announced the arrival of anti-aircraft fire from the ground.

“Eagle-one, they’re launching aircraft,” the AWACS said. “Brave bastards, aren’t they?”

Potter glanced at the radar profile. He’d once flown beside an old Wildcat for a publicity stunt, and the French aircraft were comparatively primitive compared to the Wildcat. They reminded him more of British Gladiators, or Swordfish; biplanes with low speed.

“Stay away from them,” he ordered, then changed his mind. “Arnold, engage with guns only.”

He checked that the individual pilots had their targets, and then selected the precision-guided bomb, targeting the smokestacks of the lead superdreadnaught. Pre-flight briefing hadn't been clear on what the precision weapon would do to the armoured hulls – as no one had tried before in their home reality – but everyone agreed that if the bomb detonated inside the ship, the results would be spectacular.

Hell, they might even be explosive, he thought wryly. “Eagle-one, bombs away!”

He watched as the bomb fell, tiny rockets steering it directly down towards the smokestacks. The French didn't seem to realise the danger; they made no attempt to move the ships, or to shoot down the bomb. He smiled; the people of this era had a lot to learn about airpower.

“Right on target,” Eagle-two said. “Eagle-two, bombs ready and waiting...”

“See what happens to me,” Potter snapped, and then the bomb entered the smokestack. Time seemed to slow down...and then the superdreadnaught exploded, a massive blast punching a hole through its hull. As they watched, it subsided in the water – a massive hole had been punched right through the hull.

“All eagles, fire,” Potter ordered. He watched as the bombs fell towards the French ships, two of them detonating when anti-aircraft fire – suddenly becoming very motivated – exploded too close to them. “Arnold?”

“I'm on the enemy aircraft,” Arnold – Eagle-seven – reported. “Sir, they don't stand a chance!”

“That's the sort of battle I like,” Potter said, as the last of the superdreadnaughts went through its death throes. “All eagles, time to return home.”

The borrowed laptop ran on battery power; no one had been able to figure a way to drive it from the electricity generator on the *Amherst*. As the officers watched, the superdreadnaughts were picked off, one by one.

“I don't believe my eyes,” Captain George Caesar breathed. “Those weapons...”

“They would be less useful if there was some kind of grating over the smokestacks,” Anderson observed coolly. “I want some of them through.”

“That ship could sink the entire French Navy in a day,” Caesar muttered. “I think we’ve just become rather...outdated.”

“What happens when they run out of weapons?” Anderson asked. “If they have enough to sink the French Navy, that is?”

“Good point,” Caesar agreed. “I still think that we should be building those things.”

“We’re going to build them,” Anderson said. He glanced at the map; the fleet was racing towards the Falklands, they would be ready to start landing troops in an hour. “Did Colonel Crenshaw report?”

“I thought I wasn’t your aide,” Caesar said. Anderson glowered at him. “Yes, he did,” he said. “The Marines are ready to land.”

Commandant Benoit looked upon the ruined airfields, targeted to prevent the aircraft from having any place to land – those that had been lucky enough to avoid combat – and knew that the war was lost. The reports of the lost superdreadnaughts were very clear – all nine of them were damaged and sinking, including one that had just exploded when the bomb had detonated inside it.

“Have the troops been deployed?” He asked, as he left Government House. He was certain that it would be a priority target – and equally certain that the British had mastered the art of actually hitting something smaller than a city – and after all, they knew where it was.

“Yes, Commandant Benoit,” Dubois said. All his confidence had been shattered by the sudden loss of the superdreadnaughts. “Sir...”

“Perhaps we should surrender?” Benoit asked. “I think we can still hold these islands, and we have to buy time for the Teletype.”

Dubois stared at him. “Commandant Benoit, will that do any good?”

“When the ironclads were invented, it looked as if British naval dominance was assured,” Benoit said. “It didn’t take us long – or the Russians – to develop shells designed to punch through armour. However they’re doing it, we will develop a counter – and then copy it for ourselves.”

Dubois looked a little more cheerful. “Still, this is a larger region than it looks on the map,” Benoit continued. “We will have time to slow them down, don’t you think?”

“Yes, Commandant Benoit,” Dubois said. “I’ll issue the orders now.”

The Royal Marines were a united force; every Marine trained in the Orkneys, before being parcelled out to every station around the globe. They were the best, they knew it; the elite force that landed from the seas and took entire stretches of the shoreline from its defenders, before allowing the regular armies and the militia to land.

It was more than a little discomfiting to Colonel Crenshaw, therefore, to examine the weapons of the ‘United States’ Marine; the strange weapons that looked far deadlier than the weapons the Royal Marines carried. The body armour was something new; as far as he knew, no British force had had armour since the days of knights in armour.

“We’ll be supported by precision weapons,” Sergeant Jack Hawksmore assured him. He waved a small black device under his nose. “This thing will target the bombs that the planes will launch, destroying anything between us and Stanley.”

“Really,” Crenshaw said doubtfully. “I’ve been...*supported* by aircraft before, Sergeant, and let me tell you that the stupid bastards are more likely to hit us than the enemy. The pilots can no more hit the enemy than they can hit the ships.”

Hawksmore smiled. “The weapons on those planes are different,” he said. Crenshaw resisted the temptation to knock the...*Americans* head off for his arrogance; having some Indian princes in the Marines helped to encourage tolerance. But then, most of the remaining princes knew what they were doing. Did the strange...American?

“If you have a target, they can hit it with ease,” Hawksmore said. “However, we just have to *give* them the targets, which is what this thing does.”

Crenshaw snorted and turned to look at the map. He’d planned to land near Port San Carlos, but the...newcomers had insisted on a landing in Berkley Sound, only a few miles from Port Stanley. They seemed to believe that the small French garrison on the under-populated West Falklands could be left to die on the vine. It

was madness; the French were bound to have moved in heavy guns and even aircraft for scouting.

“Where I come from, we landed in LST ships that landed armoured vehicles,” Hawksmore said, speaking to Crenshaw’s back. “If we had one of those here, just one, the battle could be ended very quickly.”

“We have armoured cars in the army,” Crenshaw snapped. “One little shell...and then they become death traps.”

“You just need better armour,” Hawksmore said. “Has no one managed a successful landing from the sea here?”

“It’s been done, in Russia,” Crenshaw said. He paused; it was almost time to land. “You’re in the first boat, with me.”

“I look forward to it,” Hawksmore said. “The helicopters will clear the way.”

Crenshaw shrugged, absently. If Hawksmore thought that landing would be fun, he was really out of his head. The small boats were ready, being lowered over the side of the transport *Pelican*. He picked up his rifle and climbed on board the lead boat, watching as the escorts spread out around them.

“We use those to fire machine guns at the landing sites,” he said, at Hawksmore’s questioning look. “The sheet of armour helps protect against bullets from the enemy, who take exception to us landing.”

“Isn’t that true?” Hawksmore agreed. The boat was lowered down into the water, splashing down and powering up in seconds. The helmsman didn’t waste time; the engine started at once, heading directly towards the beach. Three helicopters roared overhead, their weapons hammering French positions.

Crenshaw smiled as a thought struck him. “Can’t you put men on those craft and land directly onto your targets?” He asked. “Save all this mucking about with boats?”

“Mucking about on the river,” Hawksmore said. He seemed to find the line funny. “Yes, you can, but the problem is that the enemy tends to fire on the helicopters, so they have to land outside the lines anyway.” He smiled. “Remind me to introduce you to parachutes sometime.”

The rattle of bullets against the armour distracted Crenshaw. The French gunners had been surprised by the landing in Berkley Sound, but they'd reacted quickly. There were no heavy shells – *thank goodness* – but there were a handful of machine guns. A helicopter flew over and silenced the imprudent gunner.

“Landing,” the helmsman shouted, and the boat grounded. Crenshaw leapt up, holding his rifle above his head, and jumped into the water. It was shockingly cold, as bad as it had been in the Orkneys, and it shocked him to full alertness. He waded through the water, closely followed by Hawksmore, and strode onto the beach.

“Secure the landing zone,” he snapped. “Spread out, seal the landing zone!”

No one in his or her right mind would have tried landing there, Commandant Benoit was certain. Berkley Sound was too close to the centre of power for the 20'000 strong French army, even if the army was mainly made up from conscripts from New Spain. It didn't matter; his forces were losing badly. In Sevastopol, it had taken weeks for the French to make the headway they had – two hours after the landing at Berkley Sound; his entire position was on the verge of collapse.

“Commandant Benoit?”

He turned to see Dubois, standing there without his hat. They'd all removed their signs of authority; he was starting to suspect that the aircraft trailing lazy circles around the sky was watching them all the time. The storm of weapons that picked off his guns with a precision that was impossible had abated, but the accursed whirly-bird aircraft were still pouring fire into his troop concentrations.

“Two hours,” he said, shaking his head. He didn't want to believe it; he didn't want to believe that the Falklands was about to fall – again.

“We have lost,” Dubois said. His face was pale; his voice was grim. A bullet from a whirly-bird aircraft had gone through his shoulder, nearly severing the arm. Even as lucky as he was, he would never be able to swim again. “Commandant Benoit...?”

“I know,” Benoit muttered. “We have lost, Colonel. They're moving faster than we ever believed possible.”

He looked at the situation map. He was mortally certain that it was already out of date – it didn't show the two British battlecruisers pouring fire into some of his positions along the coast near Stanley – but it did show an impossible rate of advance. Infantry couldn't advance against fixed positions – everyone knew that...except the British and the strange aircraft they'd invented. Running *infantry* were taking positions, positions that it would require hours of shelling on the Eastern Front to crack.

"Two hours," he said again. "Two hours..."

"They'll be at Stanley within a third hour," Dubois said. "Commandant Benoit, my forces are being cut up. Desertion is epidemic, particularly among the newer conscripts. They never expected such an attack..."

"I *know*," Benoit snapped. "What do you think we should do about it?"

"We have to surrender, according to the laws of war," Dubois said. A surrender attempt would be accepted; the force had not done anything to put them beyond the pale of international law. "Sir..."

"I heard," Benoit said. Several things were banned under the laws of war. Cutting international communications cables was one of them. "Have we sent all of our observations to Viceroy Cortez?"

Dubois nodded. "Yes, sir," he said. "Sir...?"

An explosion echoed and both men winced, expecting to see a whirly-bird aircraft spinning overhead. "Go talk surrender to them," Benoit said, picking up his pistol. "If you're lucky, they'll repatriate you to New Spain, under the laws of war."

"Perhaps they've adopted the ways of the Russians," Dubois said, picking up his baton. "We need a white flag."

"As long as they see you," Benoit said. "Take care of my men, and don't let the islanders be harmed."

Dubois nodded. It wasn't for the islanders own good; a force that massacred civilians had no rights under the laws of war. The British would be within their rights to kill them all without recourse. "I'll see to it at once," he said, and left the room, carrying the traditional white flag in both hands.

Behind him, a single shot rang out.

Chapter Ten: The Social Whirl

Falkland Islands

South Pacific (TimeLine B)

Admiral Jackson had visited the Falklands once before, on a deployment with a combined force during the banking crisis of 2008. It had been suspected that Argentina planned to attack the Falklands again – and the United States had sent ships to support the British task force gathering nearby, just in case.

“It doesn’t look that different,” he mused, as the French soldiers lined up for the surrender. He’d been briefed by the Irish reporter, Maggie O’Brien, on the surrender protocols; the defenders had the right to offer surrender, provided they hadn’t committed any offences against the laws of war. It was curiously civilised; far more than endless battles against homicidal fanatics, determined to burn America off the face of the planet.

“It’s not as modern as it used to be,” Commander Patrick O’Reilly said. The Falklands had never truly been modern, but the airport and the British fighter base had existed in the original timeline, before the *George Washington* had slipped through the dimensions. Now...the only helicopter was one from the carrier, flying to the Falklands and carrying British officers around to mop up the remaining Frenchmen.

“How true,” Jackson said. “Tell me, how are our supplies holding up?”

“We used thirty precision bombs against the French positions and the superdreadnaughts,” O’Reilly said. He held a PDA in one hand, connected to the *George Washington* through a communications link that was utterly undetectable by the contemporary technology. “We also expended several thousand bullets, but they can be replaced in the machine shops, given suitable materials.”

Jackson nodded as a massive British flag was run up over Government House. The building would have been a priority target – except Admiral Anderson had insisted on leaving it alone. The former governor of the islands had been returned to his office, from where he’d protested the lenient treatment of the French.

“Perhaps this won’t be so bad,” Jackson mused. “From what we’ve seen, this world is a great deal more peaceful than our own.”

“They’re fighting a global war,” O’Reilly protested. “So were we.”

“Yes, but they don’t have terrorists, or half-baked idiots trying to start a religious state,” Jackson said.

“That we’ve met,” O’Reilly pointed out. “For all we know, the ongoing trouble in Quebec might lead to a terrorist offensive.”

Jackson shrugged. “I suppose that that’s possible,” he said. “Still, if the Falklands is a good example of the best they have, forging a better world should be easy. These people aren’t the barbarians in the Middle East; they can absorb some of our technology without problems.”

“Technological advances always cause problems,” O’Reilly observed. “So, what now?”

“If I was in the French shoes, I would be trying to sink us,” Jackson said. “The *George Washington* represents the one certain way of winning the war within a couple of years – and it’s in the hands of the British.”

“Not completely,” O’Reilly protested.

“The French will see it that way, when they learn about us,” Jackson said.

“Anderson’s horror when I suggested cutting the communication cables means that Paris may already know all about us...and then they’ll panic, and then they’ll get over their panic, and then they’ll start scheming. Simply putting a shield over their smokestacks will cut the effectiveness of our weapons.”

“Perhaps they’ll start building submarines,” O’Reilly said. “That’s what I’d think of, in their place.”

Jackson shrugged. “They’ll never get near us,” he said. “A single ASW helicopter could detect anything, but an utterly modern stealth submarine – and where will they get one of those?”

O’Reilly shook his head. “There’s still no sign of the rest of the task force,” he said. “Do you think that Lieutenant Sally Woods was right?”

“That they’ve all been dumped into different versions of this reality, or others?” Jackson asked. “I think that we’ll never know, one way or the other.” He smiled. “No, commander,” he said. “I think that we’ll have to accept from now on that our

home is here, in the United Empire.”

It had taken two days to complete the formalities of surrender. The suicide of the first commander of the occupation force – not an uncommon incident, but one disapproved of under the articles of war - had disrupted the French command structure; the commander of the force on the West Falklands had not been informed of the surrender before it had been accepted, technically a breach of the laws of war.

It was understandable, under the circumstances, Anderson thought, as he tallied up the costs of the invasion. He shuddered as the results came through; the only losses were seven soldiers, all Marines, and one civilian who had wandered into the field of fire. *Eight deaths...and nearly two thousand French soldiers dead.*

They weren't the elite of the French forces, he thought, and knew that it was small comfort. It would take time to develop defences against the...newcomers, but he was certain that the French would manage it. Even if the French failed – and lost the war – what sort of world would emerge after the war? Would there be a rush to develop new technologies, ones that would reshape the world – perhaps even destroy it?

Weapons that destroy entire cities. Non-state groups attacking the states, and other states. Biological weapons; chemical weapons worse even than the ones used in the Congo. What a nightmare has come upon us.

He was almost pleased when his aide interrupted him. “Ah, excuse me Admiral, but the...reporter would like to see you.”

Anderson smiled. Maggie O'Brien had been helpful, ever since the Newcomers had arrived. “Send her in,” he said, and smiled. Inside, he was pleased with the interruption. *Anything* was better than worrying about the implications of a two-hour victory that should have taken several days – at least.

Maggie entered and smiled at him. He was astonished to feel genuine warmth inside. “Good afternoon, Admiral,” she said. “How's it hanging?”

Anderson felt his mouth fall open. “What?” He asked. “How's what hanging?”

Maggie giggled. “It's one of their sayings,” she said cheerfully. *God*, she was

beautiful when she smiled, Anderson realised. “I’ve been spending time with a reporter on that ship, Sharon Green. She’s very interesting; do you know that much of their reporting is done through televisions, and that they’re all in the home? Every one of their homes has a television?”

Anderson smiled at the thought. “How rude,” he said. “Coming to think of it, how do they build enough for everyone?”

“Apparently they have moved beyond vacuum tubes,” Maggie said. She grinned. “Admiral, they defeated the French in two *hours*!”

“I’m well aware of that,” Anderson said. He allowed himself a moment to relax. “It *did* take two days to accept everyone’s surrender.”

“But this means the end of the war,” Maggie said. “We could sink all of the French Navy and then...”

Anderson smiled again, realising that Maggie was clever – again. Would his family accept his marriage to an Irishwoman? After the Falklands, he might get a knighthood, which would really soothe ruffled feathers. Absently, he wondered what the protocol was if a woman was independent and without family – it wasn’t something that most people worried about.

“Not the end of the war,” Anderson said. “None of their weapons can be built here, or even in Britain itself.”

“The industrial regions of Manchester cannot make their weapons?” Maggie asked. “What about Detroit, or New York, or even Charlestown?”

Anderson shook his head. Maggie knew some of her stuff; Manchester and the three American cities were *the* centres of manufacturing, and they had no ability to produce weapons like the weapons on the *Washington*. Liverpool produced superdreadnaughts, along with other ports in America and Australia, but it couldn’t build a ship like the *Washington*.

“We can’t,” he said. “They’ll run out of weapons soon – even if most of the French Navy is sunk, we’ll still have to invade New Spain and France itself, which they can’t really help us with. The war may have moved a step in our favour, but it’s not victory in and of itself.”

Maggie nodded. “Sharon thinks that their technology has advanced faster because

of them having more countries,” she said. “What do you think of that?”

“I have no idea,” Anderson said. He shook his head slowly. “It’s well above my head, Maggie; I don’t know what to make of it.”

He smiled as Maggie smiled at the use of her first name. Their eyes met for a long moment. “Admiral, what are you going to tell the world?”

Anderson shook his head again. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “I’m going to send the *General Howe* back to America, to inform Admiral Sir Joseph Porter of the victory. I’m going to send some of the books and one of the laptops back as well, just to convince him I’m sane.”

Maggie smiled. “You don’t think he would believe you?”

“I’m not sure I would believe me,” Anderson said dryly. “Ships from other histories, weapons and aircraft from storybook tales...he’ll think I’ve been drinking too much rum.”

Maggie laughed. “So...when can I write my story?”

Anderson narrowed his eyes. He knew that it would be impossible to conceal the arrival of the *George Washington* – and yet he was certain that senior figures within the Admiralty and the North American Union Parliament would want to do just that, at least until the United Empire managed to work out what to do with the windfall that had fallen into their lap.

“Yet again...I don’t know,” Anderson admitted. “Maggie; write the stories and I’ll send them with the *General Howe* back to America. You’ll have your success, whatever else happens.”

Maggie nodded. “Thank you for seeing me,” she said. She rose to leave.

Anderson held up a hand. “There is one other matter,” he said. “The Governor is planning to hold a ball tomorrow to celebrate the recovery of the Falklands. Would you like to attend it with me?”

Maggie considered for a long moment, and then her face broke out into a brilliant smile. “Yes,” she said. “I’d like that very much.”

Anderson, for one long moment, thought that the sun was shining on him alone.

The ballroom was smaller than Admiral Jackson would have expected, with only space for two hundred people. Even so, it was only half occupied, mainly with people who had been involved with the Falklands' trade with the United Empire. The Falkland Natives, he'd learned, took very little interest in the works of the Empire – even though the French occupation had reminded them of their vulnerability.

They must like it that way, he thought unkindly, as Sharon Green and himself reached the top of the stairs leading down into the ballroom. Couples drifted across the floor, dancing to the music of a band from Stanley, while others were gathered around the edge of the room, chatting to their partners and friends.

He shook his head as the announcer prepared to announce them. He passed the card he'd had printed up in Stanley to the man, who clearly didn't recognise them by sight. That wasn't surprising, of course; they'd never been to *these* Falklands before. The man still looked embarrassed; it was his job to *know* such things.

"The Honourable Christopher Jackson, Commander, Task Force India, United States Navy," he proclaimed, and then stopped, coughed, and announced Sharon. "Sharon Green, reporter."

"I guess he hasn't heard of the United States Navy," Sharon murmured, as they descended the stairs to the floor. "My, look at all the uniforms."

Jackson shook his head. He'd thought that the United States dress uniform – designed by sadists for dunderheads – was bad, but some of the finery on display was astonishingly outrageous, some in very bad taste indeed. The Governor, who bowed neatly to them and kissed Sharon's hand, wore an outfit that would not have been out of place in Regency England.

"Admiral Jackson," Anderson said, from behind him. *His* dress uniform wasn't bad, Jackson conceded; brilliant white, with medals and service pins decorating the chest. "Thank you for coming."

There was something about the room that enforced a curious formality upon everyone. "Thank you for inviting us," Jackson said. "So...what do we do here?"

"Well, you can dance, or you can mingle," Anderson said. He took Sharon's hand. "And who might you be?"

Jackson smiled as Sharon introduced herself. "I brought a reporter too," Anderson said, waving at Maggie, who was trying to interview one of the handful of *grand dames* in the room. Maggie separated herself with an effort and stepped over to join them.

"Admiral," she said, with a curtsy. She wore a simple green dress and looked absolutely stunning. Jackson realised one difference between this ball and a dinner in America; there were hardly any cleavages showing. The women wore clothes that concealed most of their assets, even the legs.

"Pleased to meet you again," Jackson said. "Shall we dance?"

Sharon smiled. "Of course," she said. He'd had to ask *someone* to come – and he was starting to realise that he'd made a very good choice. "Come on."

"You are very forward," Maggie said, as Jackson led Sharon onto the dance floor. He'd been expecting a formal dance, but instead the couples seemed to be moving almost at random. Sharon smiled, her face colouring slightly. "Women rarely are that forward."

"That accounts for all the wallflowers then," Sharon said, and waved one gloved hand over at the men gathered along the walls. Jackson smiled suddenly; they were all teenagers, around eighteen to nineteen years old. A second group of teenage girls, giggling and blushing, gathered at the other side of the room, under the stern gaze of a grey-haired woman.

"I see that you chaperone people here," he commented. "Don't you trust everyone here?"

Maggie's gaze darkened. "For a man to bed a woman, out of wedlock, is approvable. For a woman to do the same is not, Admiral. A woman here is either perfect, or a whore. Guess which category they put me in."

Jackson shrugged. Sharon came to the rescue. "That's *outrageous*," she snapped. Jackson suddenly realised that the boys were watching Sharon; in her tight-fitting dress, she was the most...revealing of the girls in the room. "You do have the vote, don't you?"

"Of course," Maggie said. "We can vote with the rest of them. We just have to watch our honours like an accountant watches his integrity."

“You have to read the books on woman’s lib,” Sharon said. “We have to introduce a feminist movement, one that makes you equal to men in all respects, including the right to sleep with whoever you damn well please.”

Anderson flushed. Jackson realised that he was genuinely embarrassed. “A man doesn’t have consequences from a...ah, premarital mating,” he said. Jackson smiled to himself. “A woman, on the other hand, could find herself in a family way.”

“Modern technology has removed such *consequences*,” Sharon said. She grinned over at Maggie. “You could spend time with Admiral Stud and never lose your figure.”

Maggie blushed. Her blushing was unfair to the rest of her sex. “I don’t know if I would like that,” she said. “Perhaps.”

Jackson nodded to Anderson. “I think we should find a private room,” he said, noticing how some of the female wallflowers were gravitating towards Sharon and Maggie, despite the disapproval of their chaperone. “We have matters to discuss.”

Anderson nodded and excused himself. “Right this way, Admiral,” he said, leading the way along an ornate corridor, passing some couples necking in the shadows. Male gasps and female giggles echoed as the couples melted into the shadows.

“I see that the art of seduction is still practiced here,” Jackson observed. “I would have thought that that chaperone would have stopped that sort of behaviour.”

“Seriously, as long as they don’t go further than kissing, it’s not a real problem as long as they don’t get caught,” Anderson observed, as they entered a private meeting room. The light wasn’t electric, Jackson realised; it was gas. “Was your companion right when she said that there was a certain way to avoid pregnancy?”

Jackson nodded. “Several ways,” he said. “Do you want some?”

Anderson shook his head. “We can’t stay here for long anyway,” he said. “A lot of business is conducted in rooms like these, but we’ll have to go back for the formal toasts anyway.”

Jackson smiled. “What’s a place like this doing in the Falklands anyway?” He

asked. "The islands are pretty much dirt poor."

"There's always people who want ornate furniture and fancy dress," Anderson said. "Besides, it keeps some of the islanders usefully employed."

"I see," Jackson said. "So...what now?" Anderson lifted an eyebrow. "You've defeated the French, although with our help," Jackson said. "What happens to us now?"

"I was going to talk to you about that," Anderson said. "I'm going to have to send a message to my commander, Admiral Sir Joseph Porter. Not only to announce the recapture of the Falklands, but to report the destruction of the superdreadnaughts. It may give him some ideas for operations in the Caribbean." He smiled. "Sir Joseph may have his eye on the First Sea Lord post, but he still has a brain in his head."

Jackson chuckled, then sobered. "An Englishman commands the American Navy?"

Anderson shrugged. "An American commands the Home Fleet in British waters," he said. "That high up, experience with multi-dominion commands is vital, at least if you actually want to reach higher rank."

He paused. Jackson waited patiently. "What I propose to do is leave most of the Marines here, and then proceed back to New Orleans with the *Washington*. One of my ships will carry advance warning to Sir Joseph; he can arrange a welcoming party. What happens past then? I have no idea."

Jackson grinned. "You seem to be in line for rewards," he said. "Will they knight you?"

Anderson shrugged. "They might," he said. "That normally happens for valiant action, good service, or being promoted above your level of competence."

Jackson chuckled. "However, I hope that I'll have a chance to see more action, perhaps in the Caribbean."

Jackson smiled. "I wonder what Sir Joseph will make of us," he said. "After we took out nine superdreadnaughts for him, do you think he'll be grateful?"

Anderson smiled back, sharing the universal contempt for really senior officers. "Admirals are never grateful, even for saving their careers," he said. He stood up.

“Now come on,” he said. “It’s time to return to the girls. In ten minutes, we have to drink the health of the King-Emperor.”

Chapter Eleven: The Emperor

Bourbon Palace

Paris, France (TimeLine B)

Prime Minister Vincent Pelletier studied the report from Phillipe Lavich – and the slightly more restrained one from Admiral Rancourt – with disbelief. If it wasn't for the report from Admiral Rancourt, he would have dismissed the first report without hesitation. A ship from an alternate reality? Who would have believed it?

The items sent ahead by fast train had gone a long way towards proving the story. Pelletier had had them studied by researchers from the great machine shops around Paris, and they had been awed and not a little concerned. One of the weapons, a strange portable machine gun – in their words – was *just* within their ability to duplicate, the others were well beyond science, even French science.

Pelletier smiled suddenly. The French and the British were at roughly the same level of scientific advancement; the British had a slight lead on matters marine, the French had a slight lead on ground forces. In the air, both sides were evenly matched. It was a sure thing – as far as Pelletier knew – that the British could not duplicate the weapons either – or else France would have been destroyed long ago. As for the Russians...

"Pah," Pelletier said aloud, and returned to the other reports. The textbooks on medical science were already exciting the doctors at the medical academy in South Paris; they were talking about massive breakthroughs within months. If they managed to duplicate even half of the promised breakthroughs, it would save the lives of thousands of wounded soldiers from the Eastern Front.

More worrying was the primer on the alternate French history. Despite having thousands of super weapons, including ones that could destroy an entire city, France was apparently a third-class power in the world, one reduced to nothing by a coalition of leftists and street Arabs. *What is a leftist?* He asked himself. The primer contained a series of definitions that made no sense to him at all.

"What is an anti-Bonaparte PC thug?" He asked aloud. Bonaparte was a corruption of the original Napoleon's name, he recognised, but what was he doing as Emperor? Why had one of his later line treacherously led France to defeat, then another defeat, and then another at the hands of the Germans?

A good thing we never let them unite except under our banner, he thought. Apart from the Prussians in the Congo, the Germans were docile, by and large, although the ongoing war might have had something to do with it. The French rule might be bad – from their point of view – but the rule of Russia would be hell incarnate.

He read the final lines of the report from Lavich and frowned. The Admiral on the strange super-ship was coming to Paris, due to arrive...later in the day. Pelletier scowled; Lavich was clearly moving to use the event for his own benefit, particularly seeing the possible advantages for France. The description of some of the weapons from the alternate reality were...exciting, exciting and shocking at the same time.

“Jean,” he snapped. His male secretary entered the room and bowed. “Summon General Leblanc to my office, to meet me in” – he consulted his watch – “three hours.”

“Yes, Prime Minister,” Jean said. His voice was light and breathy, the result of an unfortunate accident some time ago. “It shall be done as Your Excellency requests.”

Pelletier nodded gravely. Three hours would give him enough time to visit the Emperor, to show him the reports, and to ask for any specific instructions. It would be hard to keep the events secret at court, but it would have to be tried. General Leblanc was a skilled commander, but he’d been born a commoner, and so would not be hopelessly entangled with thousands of different factions at court.

“If this is a joke, you have my royal permission to have the bastard horsewhipped around Paris,” the Emperor said. Pelletier winced; despite the firm tone of the Emperor’s voice, he was clearly not well. Ordering a noble whipped wasn’t standard practice, even under the worst of the Emperors.

Largely because Emperors that pushed too far suffered accidents, Pelletier thought. It was one of the things that made working in the Royal Court so dangerous – and exciting. What was the point of gambling if you could afford to lose? Every year, a few new nobles would reach their majorities...and set out to play the great game of intrigue.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Pelletier said. He didn’t like Lavich; having him horsewhipped would be a genuine pleasure. Still, politics came first, always. “The

evidence does suggest, however, that he's telling the truth."

"I have never read anything like this," the Emperor mused. "If it's true..."

Pelletier bowed from his chair. Emperor Napoleon XI was sometimes a hard man to love, if not to follow, for no one doubted that he had the interests of France at heart. His long career had been devoted to France, from his position as Crown Prince to the present.

"It might allow us to score a decisive advantage," Pelletier said. He coughed. "I plan to have General Leblanc examine the reports, but if they're accurate, we could use them to push us forward."

"These city-destroying weapons should not be built," the Emperor said. "They will destroy France if they're used."

"The four minor powers will definitely seek them," Pelletier said. "Besides, how much of their technology *can* we duplicate quickly?"

"I suspect that that will be one of the first questions to put to... *Contre-Admiral* François Videzun," the Emperor said. "I imagine that he will put his knowledge and that of his people at our disposal?"

Pelletier paused significantly. "Your Majesty, we have another problem," he said. "I've been thinking about the implications, and apparently so has Lavich."

"Has he?" The Emperor asked. "And what was his conclusion?"

Pelletier scrambled through the papers. "Ah, here it is," he said. "He is advising us that everything connected with the *Charles de Gaulle* should be kept a total secret, just to prevent a new arms race."

"And in his hands, no doubt," the Emperor observed. "The last arms race was quite bad enough."

Pelletier sighed. What he was about to say went against every urge in his body. "We must reward loyalty," he said.

The Emperor looked at him. "Yes, we must," he said, without enthusiasm. He sounded like someone trying to convince himself – and not succeeding. "If General Leblanc works with dear Lavich, he won't be able to do much mischief."

“Perhaps he’s turned over a new leaf,” Pelletier suggested. The Emperor snorted. “Yes, it is a bit unlikely, but Louis the Great had a bad start too.”

“There is that,” the Emperor agreed. “We’ll hold a formal reception, a small one, for *Contre-Admiral* Videzun tonight, I think.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Pelletier said. He bowed and left the room.

The Eiffel Tower was gone.

Contre-Admiral Videzun sucked in his breath, really truly believing for the first time. All of the landmarks of Paris, from the Tower to the burned-out suburbs where the National Front Government had finally taken on the immigrants who were mining away at the integrity of Europe, were gone. Paris was grand, glorious...and French, but it wasn’t his Paris.

“Admiral?” Lavich asked, as Videzun’s head began to swim. “Admiral?”

“I’m fine,” Videzun said harshly. He closed his eyes, taking deep breaths. He hadn’t expected this, not a city that was so hauntingly familiar and yet completely alien. “It’s just...nothing like it was where I came from.”

There was a long moment of silence as the helicopter drifted over Paris. “I hate to be alarming,” Flight Lieutenant Belen Lefunte said, “but we are running short on fuel. Phillipe, where do you want us to land?”

“Never seen Paris from the air before,” Lavich muttered. He leaned forward, peering out of the cockpit. “Down there,” he said. “Down on the airfield there.”

“We could have landed right in front of the palace,” Belen said, but she obeyed. The helicopter came to a stop in the middle of the field. “What now?”

Lavich waved to a handful of men wearing fine clothes. “They’re some of my family retainers,” he said cheerfully. “They’ll escort us to the Bourbon Palace.”

Videzun shook his head as they stepped out onto the soil of Paris. He had expected Picard to raise a fuss about dealing with Royalists – even if the National Front held Napoleon up to be the perfect Frenchman – but the Commissioner had deferred the argument for the moment. The ship itself remained in Toulon,

working with the French Navy ships there.

Fuel is going to be a problem, he reminded himself. The *Charles de Gaulle* itself was nuclear-powered, now that the problems had been worked out it could sail indefinitely – but the same could not be said of its aircraft. Once the aviation fuel ran out...that was it, unless the planned refining complex could be created with the weird mix of technology in this timeline.

“Right this way,” Lavich said. His retainers, who wore some of the most garish outfits Videzun had ever seen, surrounded them as they walked to a handful of cars. He smiled; the cars were like something out of an old show, or a storage place for designs that had existed in 1945.

Makes sense, I suppose, he thought, as they climbed inside. *They concentrated a lot on refining what they had, rather than looking for more*. His conclusion was proved as the car moved into action, humming along smoothly.

Belen felt the need to talk to Lavich. Videzun smiled; their relationship seemed to be developing well. “Do assassination attempts happen a lot here?” She asked. “Your guards are being very careful.”

“Unfortunately, there are always those too cowardly to challenge people to duals,” Lavich said. He smiled at her. “Don’t worry, I’ll protect you.”

Videzun studied the canopy of the car, which would be utterly unable to stop a standard sniper round from his home timeline, and frowned. The security in the alternate France seemed very porous, even with the war on. He smiled as they passed through the centre of Paris; the people were out in force, just enjoying themselves.

He smiled, finally at his ease. *This* Paris was the centre of a world empire, one of the three superpowers. The people were not...rising up against the attempts to solve the problems piece by piece, nor were they hiding themselves from dark-skinned interlopers, they were confident and...French. He peered carefully, trying to spot a single non-French face, but apart from a handful of Spaniards and Germans, he saw none.

“No Arabs here,” he commented. “What happened to them?”

“And what’s happening here?” Belen added, waving one dainty hand at the church. It was far larger than any church that existed in the original Paris.

Thousands of people, wearing strange outfits that showed little of their bodies, were flowing into the church, which was ringing its bells for the service. “Where are they going?”

“For the morning service,” Lavich said. He smiled, placing one hand on her shoulder. “They go to offer prayers for the Emperor and the Empire, and then they will hear a sermon on the need to hunt down every last one of the heretics in Moscow.”

Videzun paused thoughtfully. “What happened in Moscow?”

“They’re the heretical strain of Catholicism,” Lavich said. Videzun suspected that Lavich wasn’t really religious in his own right. “They are barbarians who refuse to accept the authority of the Pope in Rome.”

Who serves the Emperor, in fact if not in name, Videzun thought? It was a neat solution to the problems posed by the Pope; any attempt to assert his independence – particularly after sponsoring endless pro-French sermons – would result in him getting swiftly crushed.

A thought occurred to him. “Are there any other religions in the Empire?”

“The Jews” – Lavich’s face twisted into a *moue* of disgust – “have small colonies in North Africa and even Paris itself, by the mercy of the Emperor. They do a lot of banking work; everyone trusts them with money. The various Mohammedans sects in Africa are crushed when they attempt to cause trouble; they’re very much in the minority. There are occasional encounters with other religions in Africa, but they are swiftly crushed.”

Videzun smiled. He approved of this kind of attitude. French North Africa was massive, far larger than France had ever held in his timeline, and far more developed. Without aircraft until recently, all of the empires had invested heavily in railways and links right across their territories. Until the war broke out, it had been possible to take a train all around Europe, Russia, China and India without ever leaving the train stations.

“That’s good,” he said, as the cars entered a massive park. Ahead of them, a massive palace rose up, gleaming white in the sun. “This is the centre of the Empire?”

“Oh, yes,” Lavich said. Videzun recognised the desire for power that burned

within Lavich; he shared it. This new French Empire was worth supporting...and then building up until it was the only superpower. The car entered a massive underground garage and came to a halt in front of an ornate door.

“Here’s where we get out,” Lavich said. He tipped the lead retainer with a golden coin – they’d learnt that they were called Napoleons. “Coming?”

Videzun and Belen shared a glance, sharing the same thought. A single car bomb could devastate the palace...and that would be very bad indeed.

The Royal Master of Protocol was just as Lavich remembered, a grey-haired man who knew to the exact micrometre the depth of the bow that each noble deserved. The Emperor deserved a full bow; a German prince deserved only a slight incline of the head. Lavich...Lavich smiled as the Master of Protocol tried to figure out what *he* deserved. Did he deserve the half-bow of a new Power in the court, or did he deserve a look of scorn for his disgrace?

“The Lady will have to be changed,” the Master of Protocol said, having given up and settling for a half-bow. Lavich smiled at Belen’s expression. “She is...indecent.”

“*She* has a name,” Belen said, every inch the perfect aristocrat. Lavich smiled at her expression; if the Master of Protocol had a name, no one remembered it. Rumour had it that he was immortal and that he’d served Louis the Great personally.

“Please, just accept the clothes that the Master of Protocol will give you,” Lavich said, with malice aforethought. Court garments were expensive, and they would have to come out of the Master of Protocol’s wages, not that he ever spent them, of course. If the man had any vices, one faction or another would have used them against him by now.

Belen glared at him, but stamped off with one of the Master of Protocol’s assistants. Lavich waited with Videzun for her to return, wondering what she would look like in Court clothes. In only ten minutes, she returned, and Lavich felt his mouth drop open. In a neat and frilly white dress, she was stunning.

“This way,” he said, and led them past the offended Master of Protocol. Ignoring him, they passed through several corridors, all ornate. “There have been proposals

to put a miniature railway line in here, but the Emperor rejected them,” Lavich observed.

“You must be joking,” Videzun said. The Admiral seemed stunned by the massive palace. “You couldn’t fit one in.”

“Some of the people here really object to walking,” Lavich said. “There are some nobles who have to move around in wheelchairs.”

Videzun lifted an eyebrow. Lavich smiled, examining his own trim form. He hadn’t lied; the more useless nobles did indeed eat and eat until they died of overeating. They reached the massive golden doors and stopped.

“I briefed you on protocol,” Lavich said. “Please do not abuse it, even though this is a private meeting. Only five people here, according to the information they sent me.”

He knocked at the door. “Who comes?” A voice bellowed. “Who comes?”

“Earl Phillippe Lavich,” Lavich said. “I have the guests from the alternate timeline.”

There was a long pause. Things like ‘alternate timelines’ were not in the normal vocabulary. “You may enter,” a voice said finally. “Enter...”

Contre-Admiral François Videzun took a breath as the golden doors swung open, adjusted his cap upon his head, and stepped inside. The room was stunningly decorated, and very large. Marble flooring shone as the three of them stepped inside, walking towards the throne. His awe nearly made him forget his protocol; Lavich elbowed him as he went down on one knee. Videzun followed him, lowering his eyes as he knelt.

“You may rise,” the man standing at the side of the Emperor said. There was no mistaking the Emperor; he was a decent-looking man, his eyes twinkling as he looked at the newcomers. The man beside him, grey-haired and dressed in common robes, faded in comparison, while the two military men were obviously just that. The final man, a fat young man with a scowl on his face, cast his eyes over Belen, liking what he saw.

“We bid you welcome to Our court,” the Emperor said. “We are given to understand that you come from another France, one very different from ours.”

Videzun found his voice. “Yes, Your Majesty,” he said. His French, he realised, was gutter-French compared to the pure court French, an accent that hadn’t been heard in *his* France for a very long time indeed. “We have come to make the French Empire supreme upon this Earth.”

The grey-haired man lifted an eyebrow. The Emperor smiled, but Videzun saw a trace of calculation behind his eyes. “You bring Us gifts,” he said. It wasn’t a question. “You have been stranded here against your will.”

Videzun inclined his head. “That is correct,” he said. “We come from a France that has fallen almost completely to...foreign morals, Your Majesty. *Your* France need not go that way.”

“France is all-powerful,” the young man said. “Can your gifts change that?”

His voice was oily, like swallowing raw fish oil. His hair, Videzun was certain, had been perfumed and oiled until it glowed. He took a breath. “France is in a perpetual stalemate with the other two empires,” he said. “You lack the tools to break the stalemate...but we can break it for you.”

He smiled. It was obvious who the young man had to be. That much lust for power would come in handy. “With the tools we can teach you how to build, Your Highness, the war could be over by Christmas.”

Interlude: The Echo Room

The two figures met briefly, standing in a room that defied the normal laws of physics. A human, if he or she had been able to visit the room, would have considered it impossible, a reflection of madness given form.

Look away now...

The first figure spoke, his voice echoing in the room. Echoes of conversations that never happened echoed past, confusing, deafening to merely human ears. The room echoed and echoed, confusing everyone who visited – except its creators.

“They have arrived,” the first figure said. Countless versions of his own voice echoed past him. “They have made contact.”

“All variables have been accounted for,” the second figure said. Her voice was warm and feminine. “The endpoint remains feasible?”

“Yes,” the first figure said. Countless echoes agreed with him, disagreed with him, reflecting all of the possibility of the universe. “The endpoint remains feasible.”

The second figure seemed to pause. A human’s voice would have cracked slightly. “And the remainder of the force that was removed and inserted into the alternate reality?”

“They may come into play,” the first figure said. “As yet, such additional variables are not required. The endpoint remains feasible.”

The second figure inclined her head. “There are always problems with non-Contemporary energies,” she said. “Can we be certain that we can proceed without attracting the attention of the Enemy?”

“There are always...loopholes,” the first figure said. “As yet, however, no non-Contemporary energies have been released. Our agents on the surface will act to ensure that it remains that way. Humanity will become great in this timeline.”

He raised a hand. The thousands of millions of billions of alternatives streamed past his position. “We will win in this timeline.”

The second figure said nothing. There was nothing to say.

Chapter Twelve: Home Away From Home

USS *George Washington*

Atlantic Ocean

The body hung from the roof, a single line of rope tied around his neck. In death, the face of the seaman had been denied dignity; it was purpled and darkened by blood. The uniform he wore had been torn; the cabin had been wrecked before the desperate man had finally committed suicide.

“His name was Jones, Paul Jones,” Captain Kate Rusholme, the Head of the Medical Department, said. Grimly, she indicated to two of her people to cut the former Jones down from his rope. “He had a wife; he had a life.”

Morrigan nodded grimly. Trapped on the wrong side of the looking glass, the F-18 pilot had taken his own life, rather than face a world that had never held his wife. The suicide note – one asking for his savings to be handed over to his counterpart in the new world – had been pleading; Jones hadn’t wanted to die.

“We all have pasts, Doctor,” Morrigan said, even though it had been a long time since Kate had been a simple doctor. “We’re all in the same boat here.”

The weak joke failed to amuse. “It’s not the fucking *Titanic*, that’s for sure,” Kate snapped. Her voice darkened. “God *damn* those fucking UFOs and whatever they did to us! This is the *third* fucking suicide in a week!”

“We’ve only been here a week,” Morrigan said. Inside, he shared her anger; he just tried to channel it into more useful pursuits. “Doctor...”

“There are around six thousand and five hundred people on this carrier,” Kate snapped. “Of them, roughly two thousand – including yourself – are married. Or were married; the separation seems to be permanent. They’re all going to go crazy.”

Morrigan thought of the handful of pilots who were in the middle of messy divorces and shook his head. “It won’t be that bad,” he said, and hoped he was right.

“No, it will be worse,” Kate said. Her voice softened. “Captain – Bill – what are

we going to do with ourselves? Throw ourselves on British charity?”

“It’s hard to see that we have a choice,” Morrigan said. “This carrier was never truly designed for completely independent operations, was it? We told ourselves that it was...but it’s not. From food to fuel, we were dependent upon resupply, something that we are now completely cut off from.”

“Their medical science is not as good as ours,” Kate said firmly. “Did you know that that reporter woman was asking about contraceptive implants?”

Morrigan lifted an eyebrow. “Who’s she bonking?”

“Apparently, it’s for that other reporter, the one on the *Amherst*,” Kate said. Morrigan blinked. “She wasn’t clear, but she seemed to want it done secretly.”

Morrigan frowned. “Is that not a constitutional right?” He asked. “Ever since 2008, it has been illegal to share such information...”

“This is not America,” Kate snapped. “From what I heard, a lot of women go into the medical sciences and the real sciences, but that seems to be most of what they do – professionally, that is. Maggie is something of an unusual case. Contraception is almost unknown here; they have condoms, but they seem to be restricted to people who are already married.”

Morrigan shook his head. “Good God,” he said. “They must have one hell of a population problem.”

Kate snorted. “It’s well known that a bride can achieve in seven months what a wife can do in nine,” she said. “That seems to be even truer here. Here, Captain, we’ve met some of the most...cosmopolitan people, the fairly united imperial navy.”

Morrigan, who’d spent time while on the Falklands trying to unravel the complexities of the United Empire, shrugged. “It’s a force that seems designed to confuse everyone,” he said. “What’s your point?”

“Imagine that we were back in...oh, 1860, during the Civil War,” Kate said. “Think what a shock our mixed-race, mixed-sex crew would be to even the most radical of the abolitionists. Or, if that’s not shocking enough, what about the British Civil War? They tied themselves in knots wondering if they should execute Charles or not, and if so, under what authority? They...would be stunned

by us.”

She stepped aside to allow her assistants to leave with the bagged body. “Captain, we are going to have one hell of an impact on these people,” she said. “This, I suspect, is a very conservative society – witness the importance of knighthoods and social birth, even now – and we are going to shake it to its foundations.

“One unexpected result of the development of the small car in the fifties was the sudden rise in pregnancies, because the back seat of a car provided a convenient place for impregnating a girl,” Kate continued. “What will happen here if contraception becomes widespread? Or – what about abortion? We can do it without hurting the girl – they can’t.”

“The back seat of a car can do that much?” Morrigan asked thoughtfully. “My wife always swore by hotel beds.”

Kate gave him a sharp look, realised she was being teased, and scowled at him. “This is no time for humour,” she said. “They’re going to see us as a threat to their society; they won’t be able to help themselves. We’re also going to grow quickly, and that will scare them too.”

Morrigan lifted an eyebrow. “Doctor, how will we grow? Unless the rest of the task force shows up...”

“There are nearly four times as many men as women on this ship,” Kate said. “Those extra men are not going to hang about with bulges in their pants, are they? Do you remember what the British used to say about us? Overpaid, oversexed, and over here.”

She hurried on before he could react. “Give us ten years and there’ll be a hundred thousand of us,” she said. “We’re a tightly cohesive body; we won’t vanish into the British melting pot, assuming that it exists in this world. *They’ll* see that as a threat, Captain; they won’t be able to help themselves.”

“We’re due to arrive at New Orleans in a few days,” Morrigan said. “And the fast battlecruiser has already gone ahead.” He smiled; a single nuclear-powered submarine could have matched and exceeded the battlecruiser’s speed. “I think that the cat’s out of the bag.”

“I know,” Kate said. “It’s just that...we may be on their side, but they won’t always be on ours.”

“So Patrick keeps telling me,” Morrigan said. “He thinks we should be fighting to free America from Britain.”

Kate shook her head. Grey hair swirled across her face. “They’re a democratic state,” she said. “If they wanted to be free, they would be free already.”

The Falkland Islands had never been very good at attracting teachers – in either timeline. Professor Colin Barrington-Smythe was an exception to the rule; a trained professor of history who had inherited some land on West Falkland. The land hadn’t come with any title – that had gone to his elder brother – but it had provided some of the seclusion he needed for his latest project. His work on the origins of the global power balance had been placed aside – the chance to study a whole different history had convinced him to sail on the *Washington*.

“I confess I don’t know why you named the ship after Washington,” he said. “To us, he’s the idiot who lost the Revolutionary War.”

Lieutenant Sally Woods was half convinced that she was in love. Barrington-Smythe might be middle-aged, and he was, with a small goatee and uncombed brown hair, but he was clever – very clever. His love of history matched hers; her former life had never included anyone like that before.

“In our reality, he won us the war,” she said. “You read the information we gave you.”

“I did,” Barrington-Smythe said, shaking his head. “I don’t believe it; Gates vanished into the wild lands after Long Island, although according to some legends he still hides in the woods, waiting for his nation to need him again.” He snorted. “It’s much more likely that he took ship to Havana and vanished to France. Arnold resigned and went to help found a new community when the mass waves of immigration began. Franklin founded a new dynasty of the most loyalist people you could find, led by his son. They’re Lords now; the Lords of Philadelphia.”

Sally smiled. “How much authority does that give them?” She asked. “Anything beyond social cachet?”

“Very little,” Barrington-Smythe said. “They own and work lands, and they have interests in industries, but most of the older families were caught out by the new

developments.” He smiled. “Benjamin Franklin X is the current Viceroy of America, a post he earned through hard work in the civil service.”

Sally laughed. “So they survived the revolution,” she said. “What happened to Washington himself?”

Barrington-Smythe gave her an odd look. “He wasn’t as important as you keep suggesting,” he said. “After being paroled, he was soundly drubbed by Congress, sacked, came very near to being lynched and sent back to his farm in disgrace. There’s a Washington Family in Boston now; they’re something in the merchant trade.”

“They must be pleased that we took out some of the superdreadnaughts,” Sally said. “Pleased enough to support us?”

Barrington-Smythe smiled. “I don’t think they’ll *hate* you,” he said. “After all, shipping costs and insurance have gone upwards and upwards, ever since the war began. If the French Navy is weakened, they’ll be able to spare more for convoys to India and Britain, which will improve their position.” He grinned. “There are people paying through the nose for tea.”

“Coffee never caught on here?” Sally guessed. “We drink it all the time.”

Barrington-Smythe shuddered. “Believe me, I have noticed,” he said. “How you can drink it like that I don’t know...”

“It’s an acquired taste,” Sally said.

“Then I pray heaven that I never acquire it,” Barrington-Smythe said. He paused. “You are wanting to ask me something?”

Sally smiled inwardly. Barrington-Smythe was *very* perceptive; he was far from stupid. “Answer me a question,” she said. “You and your people have quite a good thing going here, and you have a far more peaceful world than we do.”

“I’ve read your histories,” Barrington-Smythe said. “Why you never sent a punitive force to Mecca is beyond me.”

“The French took Mecca in your timeline,” Sally said absently. She’d studied *that* campaign with considerable interest. “Tell me, you have a peaceful world, and it’s not like any of the empires can *really* harm the others...so why are you fighting?”

“It’s a long story,” Barrington-Smythe said grimly. His reluctance was so feigned that Sally seriously considered dangling her breasts in his face. He *wanted* to be asked, *wanted* to be needed – but he was reluctant to come out and say it. “Where do you want me to start?”

“The beginning is usually a good place,” Sally said wryly. “What started the war?”

“As I said, it’s a long story,” Barrington-Smythe said. He smiled. “The last war we fought was the South African War, in 1883. The French fought a war in 1940, against the Prussians in the Congo...and then we had sixty years of peace.”

“I keep meaning to ask,” Sally said. “How did the Prussians end up there?”

Barrington-Smythe chuckled. “The French exiled thousands of them to the Congo,” he said. “They revolted, managed to seize much of the Congo...and held out for five years. The French gave up in 1945, and agreed to recognise borders and allow further emigration.”

He paused. “Anyway, the problems really began when the Ottoman Empire collapsed, in 1970. The French gobbled up Turkey and below; the Russians got parts of Persia, which then became a neutral zone between us and the Russians. It’s a war zone at the moment, sadly. The Tsar’s heir – who holds some unpronounceable Russian title – believed that the Russians had been cheated. He got the throne in 1990 – after the previous Tsar died of gunshot wounds – and started a build-up.”

“He killed his own father?” Sally asked. “What sort of man is he?”

“A bastard,” Barrington-Smythe said. “We never got any proof that he had killed his father, but it’s the common story. The Russians got a great deal more aggressive very quickly – and then the Chinese Emperor died. Historically, we were holding China together so the three powers could milk it, but without a Chinese Heir...it was suddenly weakened, and then it collapsed.”

“The Chinese Empire collapsed?” Sally asked. “Were the Japanese involved?”

“Only on the side-lines,” Barrington-Smythe said. “The Japanese managed to bite Korea off, but that was about it.”

“And no Italians or Germans here to make matters worse,” Sally mused. “So,

what happened?”

“There were several warlords trying to take power,” Barrington-Smythe said. “We backed one, the French backed another and the Russians actually backed two. By 2003, our forces were being pulled into the fighting, and by 2006 there was a full-scale arms race going on. And, in 2008, the war began.”

Sally shook her head. “And then none of you could claim the advantage and win the war,” she said. “No one was used to the new weapons.”

Barrington-Smythe nodded. “There have been improvements and minor victories, but so far the war as a whole has just stalemated.”

He was so downcast that Sally smiled. “Don’t worry,” she said. “We have a working group working on it already. Give us six months and we’ll be able to build more weapons and use them.”

“I’ve studied your...First World War,” Barrington-Smythe said. “You’re numbering them, as if they were something to be counted up.”

“I doubt you had time for a proper study,” Sally said dryly. “These stalemates have been broken, Colin; you would have managed it even without us.”

“Really,” Barrington-Smythe said. “I wonder if...”

The intercom on the wall buzzed. “Lieutenant Woods, please come to the brig at once,” O’Reilly said. “There’s been an...incident.”

Ordinary Seaman Fortson was feeling put-upon. This was a far from new feeling for the man; he’d been put-upon ever since he’d joined the Royal North American Navy. A talent with fishing boats and an unfortunate incident involving a bundle of smuggled Cuban cigars had earned him the involuntary posting to the *Pelican*, just in time to have a French bullet go through his boat and scatter burning oil over his body.

He’d expected to die, scared of death, but the doctors on the strange ship had been able to heal him with ease. Although walking was still slightly painful, the burns had faded, allowing him time to live again. He *loved* the *Washington*; it was so simple and easy compared to the *Pelican*. It also had more amusing distractions.

There was a nurse. She was a bonnie thing; a dark-haired woman who wore revealing clothes and smiled at him. Fortson was in love, he was certain of it, and he was certain that she felt the same way too. When she came close to him, wearing her short skirt, he'd reached out under her skirt and squeezed her bum. He was expecting her to fall into his lap and start kissing him...instead, she slapped him as hard as she could and screamed.

He lifted a hand, to try to silence her, and a burly man came rushing in. The world went dark very suddenly for Ordinary Seaman Fortson.

The brig on the *George Washington* was neater than the brig on any Royal Navy vessel, Anderson was amused to notice. It was much nicer than a would-be rapist deserved; Ordinary Seaman Fortson had a list of minor offences, including bar fights and drunken behaviour, as long as his arms. The Boson had reported on him before, at Captain's Mast; Fortson had come *very* close to being sent to a detention colony.

"What are you going to do with him?" He asked. Admiral Jackson scowled. "A rapist is normally sent to a detention colony, once it can be proved that it was him that did it."

"It has been proven," Jackson said. He glared at the sleeping Fortson. "The television cameras in the medical bay recorded everything. Nurse Rollins wants to press charges."

"This is not a normal situation," Anderson admitted. "Normally, there are no women on a ship, nothing to tempt trouble."

"We had problems like this at the beginning," Jackson admitted. "This *bastard* has tried to attack one of my people, Admiral!"

Anderson shrugged. "He's yours to punish," he said. Sacrificing Fortson would not be a big loss; if there hadn't been a war on, he would have been thrown out of the navy long since. "What are you going to do with him?"

"Normally, we'd put him in a military prison," Jackson said. "They're on the other side of the looking glass."

Anderson considered. "I think he should be sent to a detention colony," he said.

“I’m not convinced that the judge will agree. People have been known to die there, and it wasn’t a successful rape.”

“Don’t you have any means of punishing a molester?” Jackson demanded. “What about public flogging?”

“A possibility,” Anderson agreed. “Captain’s Mast has the power to hand out such a sentence, although I don’t think that it’s been used for some time.” He paused. “That will be George’s choice; he’s the Captain.”

“You would be amazed how many officers I’ve had who needed a flogging,” Jackson said coldly. “What will George say?”

Anderson considered. “I think he will agree with me,” he said. “However, such a sentence may attract attention from the Admiralty, particularly seeing it hasn’t been used for a while. Certainly, anything stronger than a flogging will be noticed, and he *does* have the right to appeal against sentencing to hard labour somewhere.”

“And to think that I thought the Uniform Code of Military Justice was bad,” Jackson sighed. “So, what now?”

Anderson had been thinking as fast as he could. “The simplest solution would be to offer him the choice between a flogging now, or a full hearing before the Captain. If he feels repentance, he will avoid further trouble by accepting the flogging.”

“And then he’s free and clear?” Jackson asked. “He might offend again.”

Anderson sighed. “I’m not sure how to put this to you,” he admitted. “Everyone knows what sailors do, Admiral. Quite frankly, there will be those who will think that a flogging is too harsh.”

Chapter Thirteen: Do As You Would Be Done By

Bourbon Palace

Paris, France (TimeLine B)

In the three days since his arrival, *Contre-Admiral* François Videzun had cut quite a dash among the Court, impressing them all with the sheer size of his ship and the power it presented. For the first time, those in the know about the war situation thought that victory – *real* victory – was possible, while those who cared only for excitement found Videzun exciting enough even for their jaded tastes. Indeed, the ladies of the court were already plotting his seduction.

Prime Minister Vincent Pelletier could only hope that Videzun was a skilled dualist. The Emperor and the Crown Prince were exempt from the Code Duello, along with the members of the Legislature, but Videzun was not. The Emperor had considered granting such an exception, but Pelletier had talked him out of it. Videzun deserved a chance to shine – if he could.

“I have finished my preliminary survey of the materials they have given us,” General Leblanc said. His voice was high and breathy; his throat had been sliced by a sword during a duel against a man who thought that General Leblanc had insulted his sister. His burly face had attracted women; his success as a General had attracted power.

Pelletier nodded. “Can any of this be true?” He asked. “How useful is it really likely to be?”

“Some of it will be useful indeed,” General Leblanc said. “One example is the histories of the battles on what they called the Western Front; they had a stalemate like we did, only much worse.”

“Indeed?” Pelletier asked. “And what happened?”

“Tanks,” General Leblanc said. He unfurled a printout, taken from one of the pieces of equipment pulled from the *Charles de Gaulle*. It had been no small task to find ink suitable to add to the inkjet printer, but it was vitally important to distribute the knowledge around as quickly as possible.

“They build massive land ironclads, Prime Minister,” he said. “They punched

through the defences, though the trenches, and tore holes through the lines to the undefended regions beyond.”

Pelletier thought of the massive trenches through Poland, though New Spain, and cursed. “Why did this never occur to us?”

General Leblanc smiled. “How long has it been since we fought a real war?” He asked. “None of the major powers have fought a war for fifty years. If it wasn’t for that British madman, we’d still be playing around with those dinky battleships instead of superdreadnaughts.”

“Trust the British to design the ultimate weapon on the sea surface,” Pelletier said.

“They haven’t,” General Leblanc said. “The Navy men are still studying the documents, but it seems clear that we have some possible advantages that we have missed. Submarines, for one thing, and aircraft carriers.”

Pelletier lifted a single eyebrow. “I beg your pardon,” he said. “Aircraft carriers?”

“That’s what the *Charles de Gaulle* is,” General Leblanc said. “I read the details of a battle in their Second World War; the British facing the Japanese. The Japanese sunk two British battleships...for nothing.”

Pelletier felt his mouth fall open. Somehow, hearing it from one of his own people made it all real. “If the Japanese get their hands on this...”

He paused. The Japanese were no match for *any* of the superpowers – and resented it. If they managed to build these new systems, they would be catapulted to instant superpower status. They were careful not to ally with either the Russians or the British – but they were waiting, waiting to see who would come out the winner.

“We have, however,” General Leblanc said, having little time for what might have been. “The good Admiral’s boast that the war will be over by Christmas might just be accurate, after all.”

Pelletier frowned. A thought had occurred to him. “What’s to say that the British don’t have help of their own?”

“I think that that’s unlikely,” General Leblanc said. “This entire event was so... random that it seems unlikely that the British have such ships themselves.”

However, speed is clearly important.”

Pelletier nodded. “So...you’re the land expert. What do you want to do?”

General Leblanc pulled out a typewritten sheaf of notes. It was clearly typed by one of the original French machines, not the new computers; the typesetting was the standard imperfect font. He passed them over for Pelletier’s inspection.

“We have to work as fast as possible,” General Leblanc said. “Fortunately, we have fairly complete plans and details of the tanks. Building the basic tanks, from their 1918, won’t be a problem.”

Pelletier scowled. “You don’t want to produce something from their” – he scrambled through the history textbook he’d been given – “1945?” He asked. “Those weapons are all-powerful, according to their texts.”

“The atomics?” General Leblanc asked. “I’ve asked some people in the Academy to work on building a reactor, but frankly, Prime Minister, that’s going to be years off. No, we can build the tanks pretty quickly, particularly the British designs.” He chuckled. “All that information, hiding where *anyone* could get at it.”

Pelletier smiled. “In their world, I imagine that they are as concerned about it as we are with the designs for Spanish Galleons,” he said. “After all, what could a superdreadnaught do to the Spanish Armada?”

“True,” General Leblanc agreed. “Anyway, we can build the tanks now – and now is when we need them. Our factories – and unfortunately those of the enemy – are more than capable of producing them in great numbers, enough to build at least two thousand within a short space of time.”

“Two thousand,” Pelletier mused. “Once you have them...then what?”

General Leblanc wandered over to the massive map on the wall and tapped it meaningfully. The map showed the handful of miles gained and lost in what had once been Poland, before the Russians had effectively destroyed it. The handful of remaining Poles, second-class citizens in their own land, kept their heads down and tried to stay out of the way.

“The Russians have built massive defences here,” he said. “So have we; twenty miles westwards of their positions. I propose to take those two thousand tanks and *smash* through those defences, heading directly to Moscow.”

Pelletier felt his mouth fall open again. He closed it with a *snap*. “You don’t think small, do you?” He asked. “Are you that confident of strategic success?”

“I have read many of the reports on...First World War tank warfare as it happened,” General Leblanc said firmly. “If the Russians have no idea what’s coming their way, it should be a stunning success.” He paused. “Which means that we must make certain that they never find out about it – at least until it’s too late.”

Pelletier nodded, then scowled. “Every fisherman will have seen the...*Charles de Gaulle*,” he said. “We can’t keep the secret forever.”

“We don’t have to,” General Leblanc said. “Give us three to four months, and then we will hammer the Russians into the ground.”

“And then?” Pelletier asked, starting to get excited in spite of himself. “What happens then?”

“We do the same from New Spain, of course,” General Leblanc said. “Rip through the North American Union defences, crush the Americans and their British masters, and force them to surrender. The world will be ours.”

“That is an interesting plan,” Emperor Napoleon XI said, thirty minutes later. “How sure are you that it will work?”

General Leblanc paused. Pelletier felt a flicker of sympathy; being called to task like that would not be pleasant. “Fairly certain,” he admitted. “While there are always problems in wartime, we would at least be able to tear a massive hole in their main defence lines. Once that was done, they might sue for peace.”

The Emperor snorted; Pelletier felt like echoing the snort. “Not under Tsar Nicolas XX they won’t,” he said. “That man set the entire world on fire.”

General Leblanc coughed. “Even so, we will have crushed the main Russian army,” he said. “The files on the *Charles de Gaulle* show so many ways of damaging the enemy, entire new...factors for our consideration. We could send people behind their lines, inserted in one of the *Charles de Gaulle*’s helicopters.”

“That’s not permitted under the laws of war,” the Emperor observed. “We have to

remain civilised.”

Pelletier nodded. “I think we’d better leave poison gas out as well,” he said. “The Eastern Front is horrific enough without adding to it.” He paused. “The same goes for the tailored diseases.”

“Those will *not* be used,” the Emperor said flatly. “That is not something to argue, General.”

General Leblanc bowed. “I am obedient to you in all things,” he said.

“Good,” the Emperor said. “Very well; I authorise the expense required to build up the new weapons, in secrecy.”

Pelletier coughed. “I confess, Sire, that I have problems relying so much upon a band of...well, independent fighters,” he said. “What sort of relationship does *Contre-Admiral* François Videzun and his nation have to ours?”

General Leblanc snorted, just low enough not to deliver an insult. “They’re both called France?”

“I don’t trust him,” Pelletier admitted. “He’s a fanatic, like the Mohammedans who pop up from time to time in the Sudan.”

“He’s *our* fanatic,” General Leblanc objected. “That’s good enough for me.”

The Emperor said nothing. “Sire, we have to ensure that we do not become dependent upon the *Charles de Gaulle* and its crew,” Pelletier said. “Failing that...”

The Emperor held up a hand. “I understand your concerns,” he said. “We need a way to bind him to us.”

“A marriage,” General Leblanc suggested. “Perhaps he could marry one of the lesser royalty.”

“It’s a pity that Princess Jasmine has not yet reached her menses,” the Emperor mused. “She would be perfect.”

Pelletier scowled at the thought. Every woman of the royal family was a potential bargaining tool, even Princess Jasmine, who was still a child. The castle maids

kept track of their development; from their first blood they were considered eligible for marriage. A child bride had not happened for *so* long; normally there were enough teenagers and young women around for any requirement.

“She could still marry him,” General Leblanc said. “There’s no requirement for the marriage to be consummated.”

“No,” Pelletier said. The harshness in his tone shocked General Leblanc; the Emperor didn’t react. “She’s still too young.”

“For the moment,” the Emperor said. “Unfortunately...we cannot offer him any of the inner circle of women, because they are too royal. At the same time, the outer circle are too far from the main line; Jasmine would be perfect.” He paused. “I will have to think about this.”

Pelletier frowned. The Emperor was a good Emperor because he *listened*. “Your will be done, Sire,” he said.

The Emperor smiled. “Yes, it will,” he said. “Until the next time, then gentlemen.”

The Crown Prince *stank*, Videzun was amused to discover. He smelt of sour oil, of too much of the effeminate perfume that everyone wore at Court. His lanky dark hair needed a comb, and perhaps a major cut, while only the severest program of exercise would have saved him from an early heart attack, if not something worse.

Lavich spoke calmly to the Crown Prince. “The power that expanding the empire will bring will be in the hands of the Court, if everything remains the same,” he said. “The power balance has to be shifted.”

“I have no power,” the Crown Prince said. His little eyes glittered with malice. “I have the responsibilities, but no power.”

Videzun felt a deep flicker of total contempt. He kept it off his face with the skill gained by competent officers in the pre-National Front days. The Crown Prince deserved nothing less than a hard spanking – he was a child, a spoiled child. The Crown Prince, he’d realised in two days of intelligence gathered by surveillance devices planted by his handful of former Intelligence people, was universally

distrusted, even by his friends.

Videzun smiled to himself. A man so desperate for *real* power could be manipulated. “Your father will be the one to hold the power,” Lavich said. “One of the possible advances is in the medical department; your father will be able to sire more sons.”

Videzun grinned as the Crown Prince blanched. He had nine sisters, but no brothers. Only that prevented his father from disinheriting him, assuming that his father knew the son’s true character. Parents could be so blind when it came to their children.

“I hate my father,” the Crown Prince sneered. His tone was...despicable; a life with no one daring to say no had left its mark on him. Videzun didn’t moralise, he had little to be proud of in his own childhood, but the Crown Prince was shocking, even to him.

“Your father does not have the stomach to develop the weapons we can develop,” Videzun said. “We really need to move faster, Your Highness.”

“My father holds the purse strings,” the Crown Prince said. That wasn’t entirely accurate, Videzun knew; the Crown Prince had substantial estates of his own, and a powerful portfolio in the industrial sector. He even owned a major shipyard in Italy; perfect for Videzun’s plan.

“You can provide some funding to back a certain horse,” Videzun said. Lavich smiled behind him at the Crown Prince, encouraging his old friend. “That sort of power could build you a genuine power base.”

The Crown Prince nodded. “Then I could kill the bastard commoner Prime Minister,” he said. His voice held nothing, but hatred. “When I am Emperor, no commoner is going to advise me.”

“If you wish to make such changes, you will need a power base,” Videzun said, playing the role of elderly mentor. He had the certain feeling that no one had tried that approach to the Crown Prince before. “You need to have your position certain, before they manage to unseat you or render you impotent.”

The Crown Prince frowned. He had denied himself sexual intercourse with *anyone*, the first hint of real discipline that he'd shown. Even a bastard child could become Emperor – and there were dozens of factions within the Court that would

have been happy to declare even a scullery maid's child his own.

"And we can show you ways to ensure that you do not get anyone pregnant," Lavich said.

"There's a woman I've had my eye on," the Crown Prince said. "A true beauty, and one with fire and warmth."

Poor girl, Videzun thought. "You could have her," he said. "With some of the things we can give you, you will never have to worry about bastards again."

The Crown Prince's eyes lit up. "Tell me more," he said. "I think that this could be the beginning of an interesting time. I think that we can do business together."

He meant that Videzun could work for him. Videzun shrugged; it didn't matter. The Crown Prince would never see the strings on his arms...until it was too late.

Duke Etienne was the leader of the peace party, such as it was, at Court. He had been against the war with Britain from the start, proclaiming in full Court that the French should ally with the British to put down the mad dog Tsar of all the Russians. He hadn't been heard; Court had enough factions that wanted to defeat both Britain and Russia to prevent a separate peace with either of them.

Duke Etienne had other reasons for his actions. He had married an Englishwoman, his now-dead wife, killed in an accident so long ago. His decision to support Britain, even to the point of sending them information from time to time, had been easy – the British needed to know what was being thought inside Court. He was already in the business of writing newsletters to nobles in New Spain and Indochina; slipping more detailed copies to a professional spy in France had been easy.

But this was different, he knew. The arrival of the *Charles de Gaulle* and its crew changed the power balance dramatically. As the leader of the peace party, he had been denied any access to most of the information from the strange ship, but he had seen the helicopter and he knew that it represented something far beyond what the British had. If the helicopter could be duplicated...

It didn't take much imagination to see thousands of them crossing the English Channel and landing in Dover. The Ministry of Marine had studied invading

Britain itself for years, faithfully updating the plans as technology improved. Armed with thousands of helicopters, they could land thousands of troops in Britain itself, and then march on London. It would be easy...and Britain would fall.

And yet...this was more than passing political information. It would be important for the British to know what their enemies thought in their inner councils, but learning that the French had the ability to launch a knockout blow – with chilling ease – was different. What side was he on, in the end?

I am on the side of peace, he thought, and made his decision. If the British knew what was coming, they might be reasonable on the subject of Caribbean islands and the borders with French territory, perhaps even French claims in China. *They* didn't want China, after all; no one did, with the exception of the Japanese and the Russians. If Britain bowed out, France could concentrate on Russia...and win the war.

Having rationalised his decision, he concentrated on typing up his small newsletter. Creating one that included an extra section, carefully encoded with an unbreakable code, was easy; nor would it arouse suspicion. Codes and ciphers were common around the French Court, and sending coded messages to his allies in New Spain was hardly unusual. In the newsletters alone, there were half a dozen coded messages.

"For peace," he murmured, as he prepared his final letter. As soon as he was finished, he left his room and headed to the dispatcher, who also happened to work for the British. Beyond that, he simply didn't want to know what happened to the letters – and to the information it contained.

Chapter Fourteen: Home Front

Ten Downing Street

London, United Kingdom (TimeLine B)

The Privy Council was the highest council in the land, at least within Britain itself. Its twenty-one members, from representatives of the Dominions to representatives of the two military services, made the overall decisions of policy, which would be rubber-stamped by their respective parliaments and the King-Emperor himself. In the deliberate policy of understatement, they met in a simple room within Ten Downing Street, rather than a massive ornate palace.

Prime Minister Lord Harriman Grey peered around the table as the Privy Council entered, led by the American Representative, Adam Grovetown. Admiral Sir Martin Benson followed him, the First Sea Lord looked paler than usual. General Douglas Highlander stepped inside, his burly form barely concerned within his simple uniform. Dress uniforms were not required at the Privy Council; as far as it could be, it was informal.

“There are no strangers in the room,” he said finally, following the ritual that had been introduced by the Parliament Party, many years ago. The Leader of the Opposition, Sir Robert Melton, smiled wryly; the Parliament Party had not held power for several years. “All rise.”

They rose. “Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you the King-Emperor,” Grey said.

“The King-Emperor,” they echoed back. Grey smiled; only a couple of women had ever risen to Cabinet rank, but the toast still held good.

“You may be seated,” he said, and took his own seat. “We have had a vitally important intelligence windfall.”

He watched their expressions. Imperial Intelligence, the one attempt to unite all of intelligence gathering into one overseeing body, reported directly to the Prime Minister and the King-Emperor. It was not known for sharing information with anyone else, nor were the leaders known for disclosing anything they’d learnt with anyone else, even during a formal state of war. Few of the men at the table had been out of diapers during the last state of war.

He scowled; it didn't take geniuses to work out that whatever was so important was likely to be Earth-shattering. It wasn't as if the war situation had changed so badly, or had it? The room fell quiet...and he spoke as calmly as he could.

"As you may be aware, we have several agents within the French Bourbon Court," he said. This wasn't news to the Privy Council; the French Court was known for being a den of vipers, controlled by the Emperor through sheer bloody-mindedness and playing one faction off against another. Emperor Napoleon XI didn't lack for brains, courage and cunning, which was partly why he had remained on the throne.

He smiled. It would have been shocking, with all the treachery and intrigue that went on in the French Court, not to have found anyone who *wasn't* prepared to work with the British for future favours. They all had to be watched carefully, of course, but their willingness to betray their country was encouraging.

"The French have had an unexpected windfall," he said, and watched their faces fall. With the sudden loss of the Falklands – and they still hadn't heard anything from the small task force dispatched to recover them, if possible – morale had fallen. A year after the war had begun; there was still nothing to show for it, but thousands of dead bodies.

He briefly summarized the situation as he saw it, including the invasion threat, and then threw the floor open for discussions, turning his back as he did so. It was tradition, even though he knew that it was stupid; hardly anyone had the same voice in the remarkable group.

"This...bunch of people from the future," Sir Robert Melton said finally, disbelievingly. "Prime Minister, what were they drinking at the time?"

Grey smiled. The French Court was also known for its debauchery. "It's not a joke," he said. "We have three different sources" – he refused to go into further details – "telling us the same thing. The French have this group of people from an alternate reality – and no, I don't understand it either."

He paused. "The question is simple," he said. "What the hell do we do about it?"

Admiral Sir Martin Benson spoke into the growing appalled silence. "As you know, Prime Minister, my office and the army" – he paused to glare at his counterpart, General Sir Douglas Highlander – "have been constantly updating plans to counter a possible French invasion, particularly seeing the stalemate

remains unbroken.”

Grey nodded slowly, grimly. “With fronts in Iran, Afghanistan, New Spain and perhaps the Congo or Ethiopia, when they decide which side they’re on, to say nothing on China...they have to be getting as frustrated as we are.”

“Which is to say very frustrated,” General Sir Douglas Highlander said. “Prime Minister, we have kept troops in Britain when they could have made a difference elsewhere...”

“Doubtful,” Adam Grovetown said. The American had served in the American Militia, so he knew what he was talking about. “Battles these days cannot be won by pouring men on them until we run out of men.”

“I don’t suppose that you have a better idea?” Sir Douglas snapped. “Sir, I understand what you mean, but unless we come up with a new weapon...”

“The French are likely to come up with a new weapon soon,” Grey mused. “This is not the time for fighting between ourselves.”

“Prime Minister,” Grovetown said. Grey looked at him. “It has been suggested that with an extra commitment to the Caribbean, we could island-hop to Panama and seal the French base there off from the rest of New Spain.”

“You have always wanted to destroy the French base at Panama,” Sir Douglas snapped. “I understand your point – hell, I’d love to force the French out of New Spain altogether – but we don’t have the forces for a frontal attack from the sea.”

“It has been managed once,” Grovetown protested.

“The French did it,” Sir Douglas said. “From our sources in Russia and France, they managed it at an awful cost, then bogged down in the Crimea. We *might* be able to shut Panama down, but the cost would be appalling. The French have the place *very* well fortified against an attack from the sea.”

“We are a race of warriors,” Grovetown said, but he quietened. “How much of a threat does this...new ship and its crew pose?”

Admiral Sir Martin Benson had been reading through the reports. “We need more information,” he said. “Still, they must follow certain rules; they will need food, fuel and weapons. How many of them can the French give them in the next month

or so?”

Grey felt the first real prickle of hope. “Of course,” he said. “How many of those aircraft he describes can they build?”

Sir Martin smiled. “I have no idea, but it will take them time,” he said. “It took us nearly two years to gear up to produce superdreadnaughts, didn’t it? New weapons? Training? Could we have made superdreadnaught shells thirty years ago? I don’t think so.”

He tapped the map. “For the moment, the danger is in whatever they have brought with them,” he said. “As you know, our worst nightmare is a coordinated attack from the French fleets in the Baltic and the Mediterranean, trapping the Home Fleet in two pincers. With the stalemate going on, then...what? Might they be desperate enough to attempt an invasion?”

Grey frowned. “If they defeat the Home Fleet, can they land?”

“Almost certainly,” Sir Douglas said. The burly general shook his head. “With naval superiority they can land anywhere along our coastline, and we will be unable to stop them. We have been fortifying the ports and some of the cities along the coastline, but they could land anywhere.”

The distant howl of air raid sirens began to howl. “They’re back again,” Grey observed. “Perhaps we should head to the shelter.”

The pounding of the anti-aircraft guns began. The French aircraft were targeting the city; they couldn’t hope to hit anything smaller. “Perhaps we should beef up our anti-aircraft defences,” Sir Douglas said. “We really need more information.”

The Foreign Secretary cleared his throat. “They might also be capable of causing trouble in Ireland,” he said. When Sir Charles York spoke, it was like hearing a yawn. “The Irish remain restive under the Empire.”

“They would be more restive if we let them fight it out to the last,” Sir Douglas said. Ireland remained divided between the Protestants and Catholics, despite massive emigration of Protestants to America. Those left were in no mood to compromise with a Catholic-dominated government, one that was more in favour of the Pope than anyone on Britain found healthy.

Grey tapped the table and they fell silent. “We have a responsibility,” he said.

“General, I want you to put the defence forces on alert, particularly for here and for the Irish.”

“We might also want to distribute the government,” Grovetown said. “If we have the Royal Family well out of the way in America or Australia, they will be safe.”

“The King-Emperor has refused to leave his people,” Grey said. He found it hard to be pleased about the decision, even though he understood it. “We have to keep him safe here.”

The French aircraft swept over London, dropping their bombs. The pilots meant to hit factories – or so they claimed before they were lynched – but most of the time they hit houses and flats. The east end of London was littered with massive housing blocks, housing thousands of people, and they were firetraps.

“Get out of there,” Constable Plod shouted, blowing his whistle. Three looters – factory children by the look of them, children of factory workers – dropped their loot and ran; he chased them for several minutes before giving up. The hundreds of fires were threatening to blend into several big fires...and the fire brigade was taking its time.

“Bucket chain, now,” he snapped at the people who were gathering to watch the spectacle. There was some grumbling from the men – the women were silent or taking the chance to make a get-away – but, conditioned from birth to obey a policeman, they formed a chain and started to put out the fires.

“Faster,” Plod snapped, as the fire engine finally turned around the corner, unloading hand-pumped hoses. “Volunteers for hose duty, form up by the corner!”

“Nasty blaze,” the fireman snapped. “There’s a bloody hole in the road caused by a crashed bomber, some bloody French wine and a dozen idiot children taking it apart for scrap.”

Plod was too tired to be amused. “I hope that the ARP has cordoned it off,” he snapped, as the air raid sirens finally died. “Bastard Frenchmen!”

“It could have been the Russians,” the fireman said, as the hoses finally started to fly. They wrestled with their hose desperately, pouring a great stream of water

onto the fire. "They hate us too, you know."

"The Russians are miles off," Plod snapped, as the water started to have an effect on the fire. "You have a plane that can fly thousands of miles?"

"There was that twit who flew to America," the fireman reminded him, only half listening. An explosion shattered a building, only a few hundred meters from their position. "What the hell was that?"

"Unexploded bomb," Plod guessed. "I think we're going to have to pull everyone out."

The fireman nodded and waved to one of the volunteers to take over the hose. "I'll go call HQ and ask them for help," he said. "We might need troops to help fight that fire."

"This was a nice city we had once," Plod said. "God *damn* all Frenchmen."

The bombers returned twice, each time engaged by the Royal Flying Corps. Plod, who'd seen the aircraft at work, knew that the pilots were lucky if they hit anything, even at close range. The anti-aircraft guns hammered frantically, missing everything they aimed at, and the fires grew and grew.

"We're going to have to pull everyone out," the fireman said. "Constable..."

"Captain," Plod said in left. Captain Farthing, his superior, had arrived, along with other policemen.

"What was in that building?" Farthing asked, as a blast of flame scoured across the sky. "What the hell was that?"

"I have no idea," Plod said. The Police force encouraged a certain degree of informality, but he truly didn't know. "Perhaps one of the aircraft got lucky."

Farthing snorted rudely. "Those aircraft only get lucky on weekends," he said. "The gunners on the ground couldn't hit an aircraft without a can-can dancer on the top, shouting instructions."

Plod nodded. "Anyway, have the area cleared," Farthing ordered. His men leapt to

obey. The remaining people, those without a place in the volunteer force, were moved out quickly; most of them had already left. The fires raged on, despite the volumes of water being poured onto them, raging through the tenements.

“I think we’re going to have to dynamite,” the fire chief shouted. “Police, get the warnings out...”

The air raid sirens cut out. Plod allowed himself a moment to feel relief, before joining the rest of the force in moving anything that could burn out of the region. The firemen raced past them, setting explosives, destroying lives.

“I’m sorry,” Plod muttered, as a family watched their home being destroyed to prevent the fire from spreading. “I’m so sorry...”

Farthing clapped him on the back. “You’ve done well, for someone on their own, without support,” he said. “The looters will be caught in due course.”

“They should be in the army,” Plod snapped. His gamy leg had prevented him from chasing them as fast as he once had. “Why do they have to make things worse anyway?”

Farthing shrugged, watching as a plume of water lashed against the fire, driving it back. “Perhaps we’re winning,” he said. “I wonder if we can force it into the river.”

“We need more water,” Plod said. The fires lashed back at the water, hissing into steam, but they were falling back. It was almost like watching an army at work. “We need...”

An explosion within the fires revealed the presence of an unexploded bomb. “We need this war to be over,” Farthing snapped. “That’s what we damn well need.”

General Sir Douglas Highlander, supreme commander of forces on the British mainland, would not normally have disturbed the Prime Minister. It was important; important enough to brush through the Prime Minister’s secretary and demand an interview.

Grey understood and listened. “The death toll, so far, is greater than three thousand,” Sir Douglas said. Grey winced inwardly. “The French have a new

weapon, a genuine firebomb.”

“We’ve been looking for something like that for years ourselves,” Grey said. He scowled; the buildings of London were firetraps. “Do you think they’re getting desperate?”

“Even with the mystery ship?” Sir Douglas asked. “They have the Russians to worry about. Poland is not Afghanistan.”

“How true,” Grey said wryly. “I wish we knew more about what the strange ship was capable of. We don’t have a spy within the very heart of their councils; just people on the outside who want in.”

He paused. “The Foreign Secretary has been in discussions with the Congo,” he said. “The Prussians might join us, if we supported them.”

“And the price?” Sir Douglas asked. “Can we pay it?”

Grey laughed. “Oh, nothing much,” he said. “They just want to carve a Greater Germany out of the remains of France, complete control over French North Africa, unlimited rights over Ethiopia...”

“That would please the Emperor,” Sir Douglas observed dryly.

“And support in building themselves to superpower status,” Grey concluded.

Sir Douglas laughed. “And to think I thought that the Russians were bad,” he said. “I hope you told them to go to hell.”

“The Foreign Secretary told them that, although more diplomatically,” Grey said. “Still, we might have to open up a front there ourselves, or perhaps the French will beat us to that particular punch.”

Sir Douglas nodded. The French, British and Prussians had spent years building Africa into a place to be proud of. Even on the map, that was a huge achievement – all of which would be threatened by a war ranging across Africa. Ethiopia, the only African state left independent, was perpetually surrounded by Europeans... and threatened by them. They were trying to remain neutral and...

“Could we not recruit the Ethiopians instead?” Sir Douglas asked. “They might be willing to work with us.”

“They might,” Grey agreed. “Problem is; the Prussians will ally with the French if we do that. They hate the French, but they have dreams of covering all of Africa with their power.”

Sir Douglas shuddered. The press had reported at length on the genocide of African tribes that had ended any African resistance to the Prussians. The world... the world hadn't really cared. It wasn't as if any of the three superpowers really cared, or was in a position to take the moral high ground.

There was an urgent knock at the door. Grey blinked; that was the second time he'd been interrupted today. “Prime Minister, urgent telegram from North America,” his secretary said. Grey took it and read it and...

He laughed. “Prime Minister?” Sir Douglas asked. “Prime Minister, what's happened?”

Grey passed him the telegram. “It seems that we have a mystery ship too,” he said. “Its weapons sank nine superdreadnaughts from France, and the Falklands are ours again!”

Sir Douglas read the telegram quickly. “This is certainly good news,” he said. A particular section caught his eye as he read through the document. “One of the people on the ship wants to come here.”

“Well, he'd better,” Grey said. “Perhaps...perhaps the French can be defeated, after all.”

Chapter Fifteen: Counterparts

Paris, France (TimeLine B)

Much to Lavich's amusement, Belen Lefunte had ditched the Court clothes as soon as she could, swearing that she would have preferred to have been naked rather than wear the uncomfortable clothes. In a more standard civilian outfit, she was still stunning; her long brown hair set her dress off nicely.

"Thank you for taking me out," she said, as Lavich arrived. She'd requested a tour of Paris; she'd never been to the capital in the shadowy alternate world. She didn't mind the city; some of the other crewmembers had suffered badly when they'd visited the *real* Paris.

"You're welcome," Lavich said. He enjoyed her company; she was less refined than a Lady of the Court, and yet she was far from a whore. With General Leblanc setting up the new factories – or rather ordering some of the old factories to start producing the sections for the first tanks – he had some time off.

"That's fantastic," she breathed, as she stepped out of the building where the alternate Frenchmen had been housed. A house and carriage stood there, waiting for them. Lavich smiled as she stepped up and stroked the horse's nose; a Lady of the Court would have had a fit at the thought of being taken out in a car. Cars were smelly and fit only for men, they declared, and refused to use them.

"Allow me to help you up," he said, as he opened the cab. The horse whined as she patted him on the side and took his hand, allowing him to help her climb in. The open roof wasn't unusual; it was common for those a-courting to ride in an open-topped cab.

"Thank you," she said grandly, and then laughed at herself. She had a wonderful open laugh, nothing like the giggles from Ladies of the Court, who could giggle at the slightest thought of what a man might want from them. Her breasts, hidden under her slight dress, moved as she laughed; Lavich felt his gaze moving to them without his control.

"To the park," he said, and the cabby started the cab. The horse neighed and the cab moved out, stepping neatly onto the road. Belen looked around her as they moved down the roads, comparing it to her own hometown.

“What’s it like where you come from?” Lavich asked, just to hear her talk. Her expression was changing as she watched, from smiling to grim and then back to smiling. “How do the people live?”

“It’s better and worse,” Belen said. “I was born in a right hellhole; I lost my father when I was thirteen. If it hadn’t been for the National Front, and its thugs, I would have been raped and murdered.”

Lavich felt her shiver against him. Absently, he reached out and put a hand around her shoulder. “Oh, it’s different,” she said. “Your streets are much cleaner, and they don’t smell of engine fluid and petrol, and you have so much less crime.”

“I saw the images of the Eiffel Tower,” Lavich said, enjoying the feel of her leaning against him. “We never built anything like that, instead we built bridges and railways...there was a plan to place a bridge between Gibraltar and North Africa, but there was a major outcry for some reason.”

Belen laughed. “Perhaps they didn’t like the thought of spoiling the view,” she said. “I saw the railway map though; you did build them everywhere.”

“And the wave front of civilisation expanded along the rail lines,” Lavich proclaimed, as the cab turned into the private park. He felt Belen sigh; it was wonderfully peaceful and tidy, maintained by a small army of gardeners. Trees and plants from all over the world had been planted in French soil, marking the success of Frenchmen in exploring the world and boldly going where no European had gone before.

He said that to Belen and she laughed. “The natives don’t count, then,” she said. “This is a wonderful empire, you know.”

“I’ll take you everywhere within it, once we win the war,” Lavich promised. He didn’t know how to proceed; a Lady of the Court would need care, while a whore would require money. Belen...didn’t fit into either category. “What are you going to do now?”

“Me?” Belen asked, as the cabby drew to a halt in a shady dell. “I’m going to remain a pilot, if we get the fuel mix sorted out. If not, I imagine that I’ll be spending time doing things for the Admiral.”

Lavich helped her down onto the ground, taking the picnic basket from the cabby. “Be back in four hours,” he ordered. The cabby bowed and departed. Lavich

carefully spread out the blanket and motioned for her to sit down.

“This is wonderful,” Belen said. Her voice was filled with awe. “It feels as if we are alone here, in the centre of Paris.”

Lavich smiled. That was exactly what the park had in mind. “We are alone,” he said, pouring the wine. “Have a drink.”

She grinned at him. “Are you trying to get me drunk?”

Lavich blushed, not certain how to take that. “Of course not,” he said. “You would have to drink more of this to get drunk.”

“Better pass over the second bottle,” Belen said, and winked at him. Lavich smiled and opened the basket, pulling out the massive sandwiches; baguettes filled with chicken and ham.

“There are no food shortages here,” he said. “We have converted Africa into our granaries and Germany and Spain into farms. We all have enough to eat.”

“Far better than in my time, then,” Belen said. She took a bite of the chicken baguette, sighing at its simple perfection. “Thank you for bringing me here.”

“You’re welcome,” Lavich said, as they finished the small meal. Belen lay back on the rug, her breasts straining against her dress. “You look wonderful.”

For the first time since they’d met, she blushed. “So do you,” she said. “This place is very romantic.”

Lavich didn’t know what to say. Some Ladies of the Court were willing to risk pre-marital sex, but Belen was different. He stepped over to her and sat down beside her. A moment later, her hands pulled his mouth to hers...and they kissed.

“Wow,” Lavich breathed. The kiss had delivered every promise of her body. One of his hands, guided by instinct, reached out and rested gently on her breast; she made a low noise, deep in her throat.

“I need you,” she breathed, and then her radio beeped. She swore vilely; Lavich giggled, then blinked as she pulled herself away from him, her rumpled clothing betraying her arousal.

“Just ignore it,” he said, feeling frustrated. “Come back to me.”

“It’s a court-martial offence to ignore it,” Belen said crossly. He sensed that she was as frustrated as he was. She picked up the radio and examined the screen. “It’s a Red Priority message,” she said. “We have to get back at once.”

Lavich glared at the machine in her hand. “I don’t know how you do anything with them following you around,” he said. “We could have been...”

He broke off. She finished the sentence. “Hot and sweaty?” She asked. He blushed. “Yes, we could have been,” she said. “We would have been to, except for...”

Lavich, greatly daring, smiled at her. “We’ll have other times,” he said. She gave him a tantalizing smile. “You’re worth waiting for.”

“Charmer,” Belen said. “Come on; it’s a long walk back to the base.”

The *Charles de Gaulle* had been intended to carry a total of two thousand officers and men at most, but for the deployment to the Pacific it had been expanded to three thousand men and soldiers. The sheer logistical problems had been the bane of Captain Mauroy’s life even before their arrival in the alternate world...and the chance to move some of them off the ship could not be rejected.

Lavich had volunteered an estate just outside Paris as a base of operations, and *Contre-Admiral* François Videzun had set up his command there. It was the oddest command in French history, an admiral commanding operations that involved working closely with the army, in the form of General Leblanc. It had taken several days to sort through all the personnel files and decide which crewmen could be used on the shore, even though they had trained for duty at sea. The soldiers, at least, weren’t a problem – they *loved* the idea of fighting an inferior opponent.

A shame we didn’t have the American MEU along, Videzun thought. He’d given Jacques Picard, his former political officer, the task of coordinating the personnel selection, a task he’d accomplished with skill, if not élan. Some crewmen, those with wives back in their original world, had committed suicide; others had been delighted to find the fleshpots of Toulon.

“Admiral,” Picard said. The political commissioner appeared around the corner, entering Videzun’s office with a mischievous half-smile. Videzun lifted an eyebrow; he was certain that that smile promised trouble.

“Commissioner,” Videzun said. “Have a seat.”

“Thank you,” Picard said. “Admiral, I must say that I approve of this new France.”

Videzun lifted an eyebrow. “Don’t you want to introduce a republican government?”

“I admit that some of the nobles here need a hole in the head,” Picard said. His wry voice amused Videzun, who had privately shared the same thought. “We will have to introduce some democracy, particularly in the army, but I hardly see why we should duplicate the mistakes of the times after the dark years.”

Videzun nodded. The dark years, the years when Germany had occupied France, had led to the socialists who had nearly destroyed France. Officers had been promoted to high levels merely because of the degree of political correctness they espoused, regardless of their level of combat skill. In Videzun’s experience, strength in one meant weakness in the other.

He smiled suddenly. The aristocratic France had the other problem; some nobles were skilled and got commissions in the army, provided that they showed genuine skill. It wasn’t entirely a bad system – the Emperor would hardly hesitate to lop the head off a noble who got his men slaughtered on the battlefield – but it lacked the Napoleonic image of the privates who were potential field marshals. Of course, the constant influx of new blood into the system kept it from breaking down, but it was a disaster waiting to happen in the long run.

“There’s no need to risk upsetting the apple cart too soon,” Videzun said carefully. “The last thing we need is a socialist underground causing trouble.”

Picard nodded. Discovering that the socialists existed in this universe as well had been a shock, even though Marx had apparently never been born. They had apparently originated in America – the tame version of America that existed here – and spread rapidly.

Videzun smiled. *Who would have thought that so much turned upon the existence of an independent America?*

“I quite agree,” Picard said. “As...politically unsound as this government is, it will last long enough to build a French-dominated world.”

Videzun bared his teeth. “I have already started to build an intelligence network,” he said. “There are things that we can build that they won’t be ready for, not yet, implications of our technology that we can use for our own benefit.”

“If we’d known that we would be coming,” Picard mused.

“If we’d known, I would have attached a tanker or two to the ship,” Videzun said frankly. “Fuel is going to be a problem, even though we are hopeful of duplicating it. This...excuse for a technological society runs mainly on coal; its ships are fired with coal.”

“We can show them how to build oil-fuelled ships, can’t we?” Picard asked. “That might improve them a little.”

Videzun shrugged. “It’s not important at the moment,” he said. “Refining fuel for the fighters, however...now that *is* important.”

There was a buzz on his radio. “*Mon Admiral*, this is Petal,” a female voice said. Jacqueline Petal was one of the handful of Intelligence crewmen on his ship. “We have been copied an urgent telegram from New Spain, using our communications system. Admiral, I think you really should look at this.”

The name of the ship was not in doubt; only two ships in the task force had the ability to launch such an attack...and only one of them was unaccounted for. It *had* to be the American carrier, Videzun realised; only the Americans had the ability to launch such an attack. If Viceroy Cortez hadn’t delayed the report...it would have made no difference anyway.

“These are your people, right?” Lavich asked. The French Court seemed worried...and frustrated at the same time. Videzun made a mental note to get a report from Belen Lefunte when he had the time. “What are they doing there?”

“They’re Americans,” Videzun said flatly. “They’ve thrown their lot in with the British, like they always do.” He sniggered suddenly. “Talk about a role reversal.”

“I’m glad that you think that this is funny,” Lavich said. “What are you going to

do about it?”

Videzun thought furiously. “They don’t know we’re here, do they?” He said. “They must be as confused as we were. That gives us an advantage.”

“True,” Picard agreed. “A strike on the *George Washington*?”

“They’d see us coming if we launched a direct attack,” Videzun said. He thought. “It would be...chancy. The Americans aren’t always good at taking on their equals – the *Ronald Reagan* was mock-sunk by the British in 2008 – but they will probably be able to defeat us.” He smiled. “At least, in a direct battle.”

Picard nodded. “A sneak attack, then?”

Videzun smiled. “Yes,” he said. “We’re going to have to move our plans forward a bit.”

Lavich paused. “This carrier, this...ah, *George Washington*, how do you know that it’s the only ship out there?”

“Now there’s a thought,” Videzun said. “We can say with some confidence that the American Marine transport – or the British Royal Marines – didn’t come though, or they would have used them on the Falklands.”

“I follow your logic,” Picard said. “If they’re like us, they must be alone. A cosmic game, played by whoever was behind the UFOs.”

Videzun inclined his head. “Follow me further,” he said. “The Americans will not work as well with the British as we can work with our counterparts here, right?”

Picard nodded. “The *Washington* might even attack the British,” he said.

“I don’t think so,” Videzun said. “Still, they won’t get on that well, which gives us time for a new plan.” He paused; the idea had occurred to him almost at once, but it needed work...and development. “We have to assume that the Americans will give the British the same information that we have given the French here, ok?”

Belen frowned. “I wonder what the Russians have,” she said.

Videzun nodded. “Good thought,” he said. “So the British will start the same

development program that we've started, but we might have a head start."

Picard shook his head. "Probably not long enough to be useful," he said. "We might have a month's grace if we're lucky, but no more than that."

Videzun, who privately figured that they would be lucky if they had a week's grace, shrugged. The communications in this world, with no satellites and hardly any secure radios, were so *slow*. The sooner they set up a dedicated research team exploring rocketry, the better.

"Then we had better seize the day as quickly as we can," he said. "The original plan, to turn on the Russians, will have to be scrapped. In the time it will take to build General Leblanc's force of tanks, the British can presumably do the same..."

"And then what?" Lavich asked, having regained his mental balance. "Will they attack us from India into Iran?"

"I would go after New Spain, myself," Videzun said. "That Panama base is a pain in the ass to them, so they'll want to remove it. Given how much industry they have, launching an attack into New Spain *and* Iran at the same time won't be impossible. Hell, they might go after Alaska, and end *that* part of the conflict."

Lavich nodded. Alaska was in such miserable terrain that neither the British nor the Russians could be really bothered to fight for it with enthusiasm. The North American Union had been trying to purchase it for years – it had been one of the factors behind Tsar Nicolas XX's eternal paranoia about the other superpowers – but now that war had come, both powers had other problems.

Videzun smiled. "However, all is not lost," he said. "We know about them; they don't know about us. If they find out about us, their first step will be to attempt to sink the *Charles de Gaulle*, which we dare not risk. For the first week, we will transfer to shore everything we can send to shore, including computers, laptops, all the history and engineering books we have, and then move the *Charles de Gaulle* eastwards, away from the Americans.

"If they find out about us, we can add our radars to the existing network," Videzun said. "However, the priority is to force them into a position from which they will negotiate for peace at favourable terms."

He wandered over to the world map he'd hung on the wall. "Here," he said,

tapping a location. "Here is where we will invade."

Lavich's mouth dropped open. He glanced at Belen and hastily snapped it shut. "Are you serious?" He asked. "We've looked at the problem for a long time, and we can't surmount the problems it poses."

Videzun sighed. Something would have to be done about the French Court; secrets spread out without regard for common sense. "You have us now," he said, and smiled. "If we can pull this off, in two months, using the weapons we have on board...then we can either destroy the *Washington* when it comes to help, or force them to play catch-up with us. One way or the other, this is the only way to force the British out of the war.

"You have us now," he repeated, and smiled.

Chapter Sixteen: All Different

USS *George Washington*

Caribbean, Nr New Orleans (TimeLine B)

Admiral Sir Joseph Porter had been astonished when he'd read the first report from Vice-Admiral Anderson. His first assumption was that Anderson had been drunk; what possible truth could there have been in his crazy story? One look at the laptop, and the other items that Anderson had sent, had convinced him...and the massive size of the *George Washington* had removed any last doubts as the helicopter brought him down to the flight deck.

But it was an *American* helicopter, and that was the problem. Even if the new Americans didn't join the handful of independence activists, who were generally laughed at by the rest of the American population, they were so far ahead of the Royal Navies that they could pose a real problem. Yes, they'd sunk nine French superdreadnaughts, but he could just as easily imagine them turning on the Royal North American Navy. Or – what would happen when – if – the French got their hands on the weapons? He was too canny a sailor to imagine that the French would not learn of the *George Washington* – and they would be trying to duplicate the weapons.

“We're coming in to land now, Sir Joseph,” the pilot said. He hadn't been astonished to see a black face, but a black *female* face was...odd. Most black men and woman lived in the south, working their farms purchased ever since the NAU parliament had outlawed slavery, and they didn't often interact with the rest of the NAU.

What will these people do to us, just by being here? He asked himself. *We need more information, quickly.*

His first reaction had been to dismiss the tales of the shadowy other history as a fantasy, one written by the independence activists, but it was too detailed. Many counterfactual essays he'd seen had proclaimed that the Empire would be too successful; a United Empire covering the entire world. The news of the collapse of the alternate British Empire was horrifying...and yet it had the ring of truth.

“Thank you,” he said. A British seaman – and those of the Dominions – were supposed to be treated with courtesy by their superiors, who expected instant

obedience in return. He supposed that the same applied to the female crewwomen; the dream of the suffrage movement.

A strange aircraft shot past overhead. "What the hell was that?" He demanded. "What sort of aircraft is that?"

"AN F-18 fighter jet," the pilot said. Her white teeth glittered as she smiled at him. "Capable of speeds above Mach Two, sir." She saw his incomprehension. "That's twice the speed of sound, Sir Joseph."

Sir Joseph felt his mouth fall open. He'd heard of plans to build jet aircraft, projects that had been forced forward by the war, but speeds *that* high were unheard of. The aircraft builders had been swearing that they would succeed for years...and so far had failed to build an aircraft that even remotely reached that speed.

"That's...awesome," he said finally. He smiled as the flight deck came up...and with a soft *bump* the helicopter landed on the deck. "What now?"

"The Admiral is there," the pilot said, opening the hatch. "It was decided to avoid an honour guard, for the moment."

Sir Joseph supposed that he should feel insulted, but the sheer scale of the *Washington* was too great to allow any other feeling, but astonishment. A capable officer, Sir Joseph had often wished to make aircraft more useful to the Royal Navies, and the alternate navy had clearly succeeded.

He saw Anderson, standing next to the strange Admiral, and marched over to him. "Vice-Admiral," he said. The black shapes of Anderson's force could be seen near the *Washington*, surrounding and protecting the American ship.

Anderson, according to age-old tradition, saluted first. Sir Joseph matched it. "Admiral," Anderson said. "Sir Joseph, please allow me to present Admiral Christopher Jackson, of the United States of America."

Sir Joseph reeled inside, but shook the hands of the new Admiral firmly. "A pleasure to meet you," he said, unsure if he was telling the truth. "In fact, it is a *very* great pleasure to meet you."

Anderson blinked. "Sir Joseph?"

“The Falklands are back in our hands,” Sir Joseph said. “I understand that we have you to thank for that.”

Jackson nodded. “It is our pleasure to help out our British cousins,” he said. “Shall we repair to my stateroom?”

His accent was strange, far...deeper than most Americans. Sir Joseph nodded as best as he could. “Yes, that would be a good idea,” he said. “The Viceroy and the Prime Minister have both expressed interest in meeting you, Admiral, but for the moment we have other preparations to make.”

Admiral Jackson was oddly disappointed by Sir Joseph Porter. He’d expected a portly incompetent, not the grey-haired man with a certain competence. It made sense, he supposed; the Empire could hardly allow an incompetent man to run one of their most important naval stations, but he seemed...worried by the Americans. Anderson had described him as unimaginative, and yet Sir Joseph seemed to have some idea of what everyone was calling the Transition *really* meant.

Sir Joseph opened his case and pulled out a small bottle. “I have taken the liberty of bringing some malt scotch,” he said. “Unfortunately, there is no supply of French wine.”

Anderson chuckled. Jackson smiled; French wine was contraband with the war on, ending the dreams of winos everywhere. “I have some Italian wine with me,” he said. “It may not even exist in this universe.”

Sir Joseph poured three glasses. “God save the King,” he said, and sipped his glass. Jackson tasted his thoughtfully; it was smoky, a variant not invented in his own universe. “Admiral Jackson, you have really put the cat among the pigeons.”

“I know,” Jackson said, as contritely as he could. “I’m rather astonished to be here as well.”

Sir Joseph nodded, putting down his half-full glass. “This ship, Admiral, will be the target of choice for every French submarine in the Caribbean,” he said. “They’re not very good at submarine warfare – neither are we – but your ship will be a target.”

Jackson nodded. He’d been unsurprised to discover that the submarines in this

universe were primitive compared to German U-Boats from 1945, but surprised to discover that war was conducted according to standard rules of war. Submarines did not strike at civilian ships from under the water; that was against the rules. He supposed it made sense; there was no point in trying to starve Britain out when it could feed itself.

“Which leads to a second problem,” Sir Joseph said. “The French may decide that now is the time for the decisive battle both sides have been wanting and fearing since serious planning for the war began. Admiral; what side are you on?”

The quiet urgency in his voice surprised Jackson, although he realised that it should not have surprised him at all. Sir Joseph was a political admiral first and foremost; he wanted to be First Sea Lord. Fighting and winning the divisive battle would make him certain for the post; losing it, assuming he survived, would be fatal.

“We don’t have a nation here, but we’re loyal to America,” Jackson said. He’d made that choice long ago. “We will help you.”

“Then the first step would be to share everything you have with us,” Sir Joseph said seriously. “What can you send us, at once, that will help us win this war?”

Jackson smiled. “One of us, a British army officer from the alternate Britain, has been thinking about that,” he said. “With the knowledge that we can give you, you can win the war in a year or two.”

Sir Joseph’s mouth fell open. He took a quick sip of his scotch to cover it. “Are you serious?” He demanded. “This war has been going on for a year!”

“Yes,” Jackson said, meeting and holding his eyes. “Admiral, what are your superiors war aims?”

“They want a victorious end to the war, of course,” Sir Joseph said. “They just want it to end, ideally with us in control of certain vital territories.”

“The Caribbean, mainly,” Anderson injected. “Alaska and parts of New Spain are on the NAU’s list of...desirable territories.”

Jackson thought about the resources in Alaska and understood. “Past then?”

“The idea is to win the war,” Sir Joseph said dryly. His tone was puzzled. “What’s

the point of trying to invade France, or Russia?”

“I thought that you wanted to win,” Jackson said, puzzled. He understood, suddenly; with the general level of technology around, a certain victory was literally impossible. Marching to Paris might end the war, but how could a force that was largely pre-World War One manage it?

“It’s impossible to destroy the French Empire,” Sir Joseph said. “The same is true, perhaps more so, of the Russian Empire.”

Jackson picked up the atlas from the *Amherst*. “You have...claims in Iran and Iraq, perhaps even Saudi,” he said. He corrected himself; Saudi didn’t exist in this timeline. “This giant bit of sand here.”

“Useless territory,” Sir Joseph said. “What do we want with the stupid barbarians there?”

It was an attitude that Jackson rather wished the US had shared. “Oil,” he said. “You want some of our technology, you will need the oil there.”

“The French use it in some of their ships,” Anderson said. “We don’t; we don’t have that much oil apart from Texas.”

Jackson smiled. The history of Texas in this timeline was even more exciting than the history of *his* Texas. “If you want to end the war, with our help you could reach Paris and force the French out of the war.”

Sir Joseph took a breath, then another. He believed the...American, he believed him, and that made it worse. The balance of power between the three superpowers – and the four minor powers, but no one important cared about them – had served the world well for over a century; wars had been minor matters, not the total destruction that Jackson was talking about. Who in London, or Amherst, or Canberra...or wherever wanted to risk destroying an entire empire?

“I would really like to believe that you were boasting,” he said.

“He’s not,” Anderson said. The young man, the supremely competent man, believed that it was possible. Sir Joseph knew that the armies had plans to do that, but they all promised to be disasters. If it was possible...

“I’ve read their history books,” Anderson said, interrupting his thoughts. “They managed to make it to Berlin from Britain.”

Sir Joseph sighed. “I think that we will be playing for limited gains,” he said. “We do not have the resources to handle the disintegration of the French Empire, let alone the Russian one.” He sighed. “It might have worked during the Global War, and there are those who said that we should have done just that, but it won’t work now.”

Jackson shrugged. “So, you’ll start improving your weapons anyway?”

Sir Joseph nodded. “This...army officer, what does he want to do?”

“He wants to take a seaplane to London,” Jackson said. “Do you have aircraft going from Washington to London? If not, one of our seaplanes can do it.”

Sir Joseph blinked. “Washington?” He asked. “Where’s Washington?”

Jackson sighed, looking very...lost for a moment. “I meant here, your North American Union,” he said. “Where is your capital anyway?”

“Amherst, named after my ship,” Anderson said. “Yes, we do have a trans-Atlantic flight service.”

Jackson nodded. “So, now what?”

Sir Joseph took a breath and tried to gain control. There was so much about this situation that...astonished him. “According to the report from Admiral Anderson,” he said, “you need food, right?”

“And a place to live when we’re not on ship,” Jackson added.

Sir Joseph nodded. “I have taken the liberty of clearing a barracks town for your people,” he said. “It’s not very big, but it could hold a couple of thousand people if it had to. I think that we’ll have to take everything slowly and carefully.”

“We’re going to have to chase the French out of the Caribbean,” Anderson said. “Sir Joseph, we have the capability to do that for the first time ever – we have to move fast before they adapt.”

“How are they going to adapt?” Jackson asked dryly. “They don’t have any

information themselves?”

“They have good observers,” Anderson said. “If they put a grating over their smokestacks, then what will happen to your weapons?”

“There are others,” Jackson said.

“That is a point,” Sir Joseph said. “What happens if we end up dependent upon your weapons?”

“We’ll run out if we use them all the time,” Jackson admitted. Sir Joseph was oddly relieved; they did have limits. “In theory, we can make some more, but I would hate to have to rely on it.”

Sir Joseph smiled. “What about fuel for your aircraft?” He asked. “Will you not need more?”

Jackson nodded. “Yes, that is a problem,” he said. “I think that we will be able to produce it, given time. Until then, we will have to conserve.”

“Particularly since protecting the *Washington* is ultra-important,” Sir Joseph said. “As I said, they will come to try to destroy it, whatever it takes.”

“Then we should head to Panama and destroy their fleet *now*,” Anderson said. He smiled, tapping the map. “We move now, before they can even begin to change their methods, and sink their fleet. The war here could be over within a week!”

Sir Joseph shook his head. He’d seen all kinds of schemes to deal with the French base at Panama, all of which would have been disasters if they’d actually been carried out, and he didn’t believe that the *Washington* could change that – at least, change it enough to make risking the super-ship worthwhile.

“The priority is to make certain that we cannot lose the new knowledge before it’s too late,” he said firmly. “That...is our priority.”

“So you said,” Jackson said. “So, we can move some of our people to shore?”

“I’ve made the arrangements,” Sir Joseph said. “One final question; will you accept my orders?”

Jackson hesitated noticeably. “There is a film, a cinema reel, back where I came

from,” he said. “In it, a carrier like this one is sent back in time, and they wonder the same thing.” Sir Joseph lifted an eyebrow. “They wonder if the Americans of that era, who weren’t always good people, were worthy of the carrier. Point was; the well-being of America came first.”

Sir Joseph nodded. “But America doesn’t exist here,” Anderson said. “So... what does that mean for you?”

Jackson drew himself up. “I will obey orders, within reason,” he said. “I have to look after my people first, Admiral; they’re all I have.”

Sir Joseph decided to settle for what he had. “Thank you,” he said. “The first order of business, the first order, is lunch at Admiralty House.”

Jackson chuckled. “Lunch sounds good,” he said. “And after that?”

Sir Joseph hesitated. “I’m not sure,” he said. “It depends upon what London makes of all this.”

“A training command,” Anderson said. Jackson’s face...changed. “You’ll need new people, Admiral, and we’ll need people who are used to working with your technology.” He nodded sympathetically. “It might be the best use of their talents, Admiral.”

“A training command,” Jackson repeated. “It should be interesting.”

Sir Joseph almost smiled at the expression on his face. “We’ll end up giving you your rank, perhaps even a knighthood,” he said. “With all this new technology, you will deserve it.”

“I assume that you were listening,” Jackson said, after the meeting had concluded. He stepped into the small office with a sigh. “What do you think?”

Morrigan smiled. “I am the very model of a modern Royal Admiral,” he sang, not entirely tunefully. “The guy is a bit of an unimaginative martinet, isn’t he? Anderson was right; we should be hitting Panama now.”

“You’re supposed to be aggressive,” Jackson said. “We have the only fragment of America here, in this ship. Risking it in a strike against Panama...”

“We could launch from here,” Morrigan said. “It would eat up a lot of our weapons and fuel, but it would settle the problem of Panama and the French position there.” He paused. “We are well out of range of their...shabby excuses for aircraft.”

“Perhaps,” Jackson said. There were more important matters to worry about. “Anything on sonar?”

Morrigan shook his head. “Nothing,” he said. “Nothing at all, which I suspect is what we can expect.”

Jackson frowned. “Sir Joseph was right; we will be their first target,” he said. “If they manage to knock us out, the war returns to its balanced state.”

“Fancy not wanting to invade France,” Morrigan said. “Don’t they want the war to end?”

“I think that they don’t have the technology or the manpower,” Jackson said. “They’ll change their tune by the time they see what we can do for them.”

Morrigan saluted. “I hope that you’re right,” he said. “So...what now?”

Jackson smiled. “I’ve been invited to lunch,” he said. “Doubtless it will be very British; roast beef, boiled potatoes, Yorkshire pudding and doubtless a steamed pudding for desert.” He chuckled. “For the moment, remain on alert; if the sonar picks up a hint of a submarine, launch an ASW helicopter at once.” He considered. “Also, launch some drones, the high-altitude versions, and scout out around the islands here. We may as well see what the French have on their islands.”

“Yes, sir,” Morrigan said. “Anything else?”

“Strange not to have a thousand things to do,” Jackson mused. “I want you to come up with a list of people we can send ashore, people with skills and knowledge they will need here.”

“People with manufacturing experience,” Morrigan mused. Jackson nodded; improving the oil refining technology here, for example, would mean that the *Washington’s* aircraft could get the fuel they needed. “So...we’re really going to join them?”

Jackson lifted an eyebrow. “Your exec bending your ear again?” He asked. “What choice do we have?”

Chapter Seventeen: Aliens of London

Hotel Splendid/Ten Downing Street

London, United Kingdom (TimeLine B)

The aircraft was primitive compared to the transatlantic airliners that had moved between Britain and America in the original timeline, the timeline that Colonel Sir Benjamin Phillips had been born in. His knighthood, a reward for his services in Iran, had no value in the aircraft; he hadn't been knighted by King-Emperor George X, after all.

Sir Benjamin shook his head slowly, from side to side, as the aircraft headed down through Ireland to London. The people of this timeline had never developed the jet engine, but their propeller-driven aircraft were almost as good as some in his timeline. If they'd spent the time developing weapons of war, they might have happened upon tanks, or jets, or even nuclear power...but instead they'd concentrated on developing their civilisation.

Sad, Sir Benjamin thought, although he wasn't sure exactly what he meant. His aircraft could not have survived an attack even by Contemporary aircraft, let alone the modern aircraft from the *Washington*. And yet...it had survived; all three of the superpowers abided by laws and conventions that had developed for years. Instead of the disaster area of Africa, the three powers involved had truly developed it, saving it from years of suffering.

"We're the snake in the garden," he muttered, and wondered. He'd made a private promise to himself to avoid mentioning some weapons, but he was grimly certain that they would be developed anyway. The war might have gone on for years, without their appearance, and God alone knew what would happen now that the French *had* to know that the *Washington* existed. He was certain that the landlines from New Orleans would be buzzing, even though the Royal Navies had managed to prevent any official mention of the ship.

"I beg your pardon," Lieutenant Pham asked. The American, a descendent of refugees from Vietnam, didn't seem to have the same sense of...concern about the future. "Sir...?"

"It's nothing," Sir Benjamin said. Pham's country didn't exist in this timeline; the forces of communism had never gained a country. Socialists existed, apparently,

but they held no country. “Are you still in contact with the *Washington*?”

The young man played with the laptop on his lap. “No, sir,” he said. One advantage of the pre-Information age was that electronic signals couldn’t really harm the aircraft. “We’re out of range.”

Sir Benjamin nodded. Some of the hastily selected equipment they carried might be able to communicate with the *Washington*, but it would have to be set up in London. Absently, he wondered how the British Government was coping with the news of the future; a small digest had been sent through the telegraphs.

A young man from India stepped into the main cabin, the co-pilot of the plane. Somewhat to Sir Benjamin’s surprise, the United Empire took a much more relaxed approach to race than he would have expected, although it would have been difficult to maintain white dominance everywhere.

“*Sahib*, the plane will be landing in thirty minutes,” he said. “You will be taken to a hotel and then you will be seeing people in the morning.”

Pham yawned. “Thank you,” he said. Sir Benjamin nodded beside him. “Why aren’t we seeing them today?”

“Because you’re tired,” Sir Benjamin said. “Young man, where are we being kept?”

“The Hotel Splendid,” the co-pilot said. He grinned openly at them. “That’s supposed to be the best hotel in London. It’s where the princes stay.”

Sir Benjamin nodded as the co-pilot returned to the cabin. He’d managed to convince the British-Americans, or whatever they would be called to distinguish them from the crew of the *Washington*, to give him a primer on the workings of the British Empire. India, a fully-equal dominion to any other domination, had a curious government composed of the princes and the elected representatives, following the British model. It all seemed to hang together rather well.

No Gandhi, no Jinnah, no Nehru...and a peaceful world, he thought, and smiled. The Indian Subcontinent was far more peaceful than it had been in the original timeline, without partition...and a constant threat from Russia. Afghanistan was supposed to be a border state, but with both powers playing silly buggers with the tribes and trying to gain control, it was a constant threat. Railways and aircraft flew over the mountains, opening up the region despite the best that the tribesmen

can do.

“This is a better world than ours,” he mused. Terrorism was minimal; there was no extremist Islam, no dirt-poor states sending their poor and helpless to be a drain on the west. It was – or had been – peaceful...and stagnant. If an asteroid came and hit the Earth, these people would be helpless.

There was a bump as the aircraft touched down on dry land. They’d touched down before, on Iceland and Ireland, but this was different. He peered out of the window, searching for the towers of London...and didn’t see them.

“This is not Heathrow,” Pham commented. That was true; it was on the wrong side of London, for starters. The plane taxied to a stop on the tarmac and opened its hatch, allowing a moveable stair to be attached to the plane. A man, dressed in a uniform that looked to have come from Buckingham Palace, bustled up the stairs and came into the plane.

“Colonel Sir Benjamin Phillips and party?” He asked. His English was different, oddly accented. “I’m Charles Barrington-Smythe, special representative of the Foreign and Colonial Office.”

“Ah...pleased to meet you,” Sir Benjamin said, wondering why it was surprising. The Colonial Office had been defunct for years in the original timeline, but it would certainly still exist in the strange new world. “Are you our guide?”

The young man smiled. With his dark hair and eager-to-please attitude, he would have been a success in any world. “Yes, Sir Benjamin,” he said. He shook hands quickly with Sir Benjamin, and then with Pham, showing no hesitation at shaking hands with a Vietnamese man. “I’m to show you both to the hotel, and then sleep on the floor in front of your rooms.”

He smiled brightly to show that that was a joke. “Not quite,” he admitted, at Sir Benjamin’s questioning look. “I’m to remain in the hotel though, at your service.”

“Thank you,” Sir Benjamin said, as grandly as he could. “What about our luggage?”

“Items you want to go with you, point them out now,” Barrington-Smythe said, as they climbed out of the plane. Sir Benjamin sniffed and caught...a surprisingly clean odour, for an airport. The entire airport looked...primitive, but not dingy. “Anything else will be taken to the base tonight.”

Sir Benjamin nodded as the stewards unloaded their equipment. He separated his travelling case; Pham made certain he had his laptop, and allowed the stewards to take the rest. He looked around the airport and blinked; there was something missing from it.

Pham put it into words. “Mr Barrington-Smythe, have you closed the airport, just for us?”

Barrington-Smythe shook his head, sending his short black locks everywhere. “No, why?” He asked. “We kept activity to a normal level, just to prevent anyone from noticing.”

Sir Benjamin gaped at him. “This is a normal level?” He asked, waving a hand at the nearly empty airport. “What happens during the dry season? Do people go on overseas holidays here?”

Barrington-Smythe looked puzzled. “Most people would go on a ship for a holiday,” he said. “A lot of people loved going to Spain for a holiday, but with the war on...”

“I understand,” Sir Benjamin said, shaking his head. “How many flights are there each day?”

“I have no idea,” Barrington-Smythe said. “Around seventy would be normal, I think.”

Sir Benjamin thought of the hundreds of flights that left Heathrow in the original timeline, and held his tongue. A large car drove up to them and Barrington-Smythe opened the door. Sir Benjamin smiled; it was a Rolls Royce.

“No, it’s a Paterson,” Barrington-Smythe said, when he asked. “He was a car manufacturer some time ago. He made hundreds of cars, selling them to all and sundry.”

Sir Benjamin shook his head as they climbed in, taking their places and waiting for the driver to move. Barrington-Smythe issued instructions to the driver and the car moved off, heading onto the main road into London. He felt, for the first time, truly shocked...London was different, far more different than he remembered. It was greener in places, and darker in others.

“There’s no Indians,” Pham muttered. They were moving though the regions of

London that had once – in another reality – housed curry shops and an Asian minority. There were a handful of Indian-based restaurants, but none of the practical settlements that successive governments had denied existed...before the war had begun.

A great improvement, Sir Benjamin thought, remembering the uprising in the streets. A mad mullah – that term didn't even seem to exist here – had convinced the Muslims that if they rose up, Allah would protect them. Barely armed, utterly undisciplined, they'd been massacred, once the British Government took the gloves off. Sir Benjamin remembered machine-gunning them in the streets and shuddered – the streets had run with blood that day.

“Here's the hotel,” Barrington-Smythe said. Sir Benjamin grabbed onto it gratefully; his mind had been spinning around, confused by the radically different London. The Hotel Splendid was magnificent; he heard Pham's indrawn breath beside him as he stared up at the fantastic building.

“It's wonderful,” he said, as they entered the lobby. A friendly bellhop took the bags in the service lift, and then gaped at the coins that Sir Benjamin had tipped him with.

“None of the new-fangled coins here,” Sir Benjamin said, more disturbed by that than he wanted to admit. “Now what?”

“Up in the lift,” Barrington-Smythe said, opening the lift. A chambermaid, wearing an outfit that would have disgraced a French waitress, motioned them inside, her dress moving around her body in a way that tantalised and suggested, rather than revealed.

“This is your floor,” she said, in a voice that might have been intended to be sultry. Sir Benjamin, who was used to outright pornographic videos, wasn't impressed. “If you need anything, just give me a call.”

“Thank you,” Barrington-Smythe said. “This way, Sir Benjamin.” He waited until the chambermaid had disappeared, then elbowed Sir Benjamin. “They're supposed to be quite accommodating.”

“I'm married,” Sir Benjamin said automatically, and then the loss struck him. He reeled as it finally sank in; he would never meet his wife again, let alone hold her in his arms. Even if she had a counterpart in this strange world – an impossible event – she would not be the same person.

“Sir Benjamin?” Barrington-Smythe asked. “Sir?”

“I’m fine,” Sir Benjamin said. His voice was harsher than he had intended. “I just need some sleep.”

Barrington-Smythe didn’t argue, he just threw open a large door and waved them in. “You have rooms on each side of this stateroom,” he said. “Your meeting with the council set up to handle this...event is at 1000 tomorrow, or eleven hours from now.”

Sir Benjamin shook his head. The room, decorated in red and gold, was utterly fantastic, almost in bad taste. Golden objects hung from the ceiling, the bed itself was large enough for an orgy.

“I could call that maid,” Pham said, as soon as they were alone. Barrington-Smythe had left, promising to return for them in the morning. “That might be fun.”

Sir Benjamin sighed. “Do as you please,” he said, too tired to argue. “I’m off to bed.”

Barrington-Smythe, true to his word, had returned for them at 0800hrs, inviting them both to breakfast. From the little hints of lipstick on Pham’s face, Sir Benjamin deduced that he had indeed succeeded with the chambermaid, which showed a different side of the United Empire. He’d expected her to refuse to bed an oriental on principle, but apparently she’d been quite willing.

“And now we have to be off,” Barrington-Smythe said, as soon as they had finished their excellent breakfast. It had been utterly delicious, rather than the half-cooked breakfasts in some of the original London’s hotels. The meat had been perfect; the eggs done to a turn. “The Prime Minister is waiting.”

Pham yawned. Sir Benjamin took the opportunity to mutter a dry comment about beds being made to sleep in, rather than more pleasurable activities, and then turned his full attention to Barrington-Smythe.

“We’re going to take a car again,” Barrington-Smythe said. Sir Benjamin nodded; there had been fewer cars on the streets of London than he’d expected, perhaps the first real sign of rationing that he’d seen. “The Prime Minister will not be

happy if we're late."

"Lead on, McDuff," Sir Benjamin said, checking to make sure that he had his equipment. "Let's go."

The trip through London wasn't much different from the one the day before, but he was more able to look around and compare notes. *This* London was more sedate, if such a thing were possible, than *his* London, and yet it had a certain charm. This people were the heart of a global empire and it showed in the way they walked and talked.

"Here we are," Barrington-Smythe said. Sir Benjamin started guiltily. Ten Downing Street stood in front of them, still the same building that it had been in the original timeline. He'd half-expected to visit Buckingham Palace, but instead it was what he had expected. "Right this way."

The policeman at the door was usual too, along with the corridors. A terrible suspicion began to blossom in Sir Benjamin's mind, but it vanished when the main doors opened, revealing four men sitting around a table, waiting for them.

"Sir Benjamin, Prime Minister," Barrington-Smythe said.

A grey-haired man stood up and extended a hand. "Harriman Grey, Prime Minister," he said. "You must be Colonel Sir Benjamin Phillips."

"I'm not sure if I am a knight here," Sir Benjamin admitted. "Still, guilty as charged."

Grey's face twitched. "This is the council set up to decide what to do about you people," he said. "Unfortunately, we have to move fast. Does the name *Charles de Gaulle* mean anything to you?"

Sir Benjamin felt his blood run cold. "That was the name of a carrier with the original task force," he said. A nasty thought occurred to him; *that* detail had never been shared with anyone, as far as he knew. "How did you know that?"

"That carrier has arrived in France," Grey said. His face was suddenly lined with worry. "We have some sources in the French Court, Sir Benjamin; one of them warned us about the new arrival. We were panicking...until we heard about you."

"We still are panicking," a man in civilian clothes said. "Adam Grovetown,

American Representative. Sir Benjamin, will your people help us?”

Sir Benjamin nodded once. “That’s what I came here to do,” he said. “Do the French know about the *Washington*?” He shook his head angrily. “No, they must know; we attacked the Falklands, after all. Which means...”

“That whatever you tell us, the French will tell the French,” Grey said. “How much damage can that carrier do?”

Sir Benjamin glanced at Pham, who had been trying to stay out of the way. They’d had no idea at all that any other units had come through the transition, thanks to the UFOs. They’d detected no sign at all of them, and so they’d assumed that they were alone...and now, there could be task force units everywhere – anywhere.

Pham coughed. “The *Charles de Gaulle* is a far less capable unit than the *George Washington*,” he said. “In a straight-up battle, the *Charles de Gaulle* would be swiftly destroyed. Unfortunately, they would be capable of introducing as much technology as we could, perhaps more.”

Sir Benjamin scowled. “It gets worse,” he said. “For reasons I won’t discuss at the moment, the admiral commanding that ship is known to be very pro-French.”

A man wearing a naval uniform similar to the one worn by Admiral Anderson coughed. “Sir Benjamin, they’re *French*,” he snapped. “Of course they would be pro-French.”

“It’s a long story,” Sir Benjamin said, deciding that French Politics 101 could wait for a while. It would hardly be relevant here anyway. “The point is; they could introduce new ideas into the French Empire, including ones that could be used to break the land stalemate in the east.”

“Both sides have lost thousands of men fighting in Poland,” Grey said. “If they could break the stalemate somehow...”

The army officer nodded. “If we had the ability to break the stalemate in Alaska, or New Spain, we would use it,” he said.

“We’re offering that to you,” Sir Benjamin said. He sighed grimly. “We’re also going to have to invest some time in confirming that the *Charles de Gaulle* was the only other ship to arrive.”

“Oh God,” the naval officer said. “The Russians might have a ship as well.”

There *had* been Russian ships in the task force, Sir Benjamin knew. He decided not to mention that for the moment. “It’s a possibility,” he conceded. “For the moment, however, we have to start preparing the new weapons.”

“As the French will be doing the same,” Grey said. “If you were in charge of France, Sir Benjamin, what would you do?”

Sir Benjamin stood and wandered over to the massive map on the wall, displaying the war situation. The Falkland Islands were still marked as occupied, he noted with some amusement. “There are dozens of ideas, ranging from tanks – land ironclads – to improved artillery that we were going to show you,” he said. “We must assume that the French have been thinking along the same lines.”

“The logic of the situation will force them to think about the same things and along the same lines,” Pham injected.

Sir Benjamin nodded. “If I was in their place, I would head east,” he said. “I know nothing about the Russian Empire in this timeline, but according to the people in America it’s nasty. If the French can break through the defences, they will be able to topple the Russians and gain control of Russian land. If they do that...they will be unbeatable.”

He smiled at their shock. “If I was in their place, that’s what I would do,” he said. “We have to prepare for the worst, Gentlemen; France armed with the resources of Europe.”

Chapter Eighteen: Reporting From America

New Orleans

North American Union (TimeLine B)

Sharon Green wasn't certain what to make of New Orleans, particularly the larger section that was the main city outside the naval base. The British had converted a large section of the city into a naval base, as well as a major army garrison; pro-Spanish sentiment had been very strong for the first years after the Global War. Even after nearly two hundred years, there were strong family ties to New Spain – and therefore a hotbed of spies.

It was odd, to her eyes, and she could only be grateful that she'd only visited the city twice before coming on board the *George Washington*. The city was a curious mix of the familiar and the alien; it was both the same as it had been in her timeline...and radically different.

"The food here is generally regarded as good," Maggie O'Brien said. The young reporter smiled dryly at Sharon. "Americans and Hispanics love it here; the rest of the Empire is not so keen."

"And no hurricane here," Sharon said. The hurricane that had struck New Orleans, only a few years ago from her perspective, had never occurred in the new universe. Absently, she wondered if that had been missed because of the lesser damage to the ecology, or if there was another, deeper cause.

"Apparently not," Maggie said wryly. "I saw the pictures you showed me."

Sharon smiled. "So, what are we doing here?"

"Apart from eating?" Maggie asked. "We're going to meet the censor."

Sharon blinked. "They're going to censor your reports?"

"More or less," Maggie said. "It should have been done a few days ago, just to get it out on the telegraph. As it happened, you people have been more important to the world at large."

Sharon snorted as they entered yet another street, this one filled with dancers.

“Everyone can see the *Washington*,” she said. “You yourself said that there are still thousands of smugglers and spies around. They must know by now.”

Maggie laughed. “They would have known once the Falklands was attacked,” she said. “The problem is; how much do they know?”

“Hey, pretty ladies,” a man called. “Do you want a kiss?”

Sharon felt a flicker of raw anger. “Fuck off,” she snapped. The man lifted his hat and vanished. “What was that about?”

“Life here is a permanent party, if you believe the tourist brochures,” Maggie said. She chuckled. “It’s not all it’s cracked up to be.”

“I can see that,” Sharon said. She glanced around; only a handful of Spanish-looking women were on the streets. “Where are the women?”

“Depends,” Maggie said. “With some of the businesses, they run them and their menfolk have fun and avoid conscription. Some are whores” – her mouth twisted – “and they’re probably at the base, trying to service all the seamen on Felix’s fleet...”

“So it’s Felix now,” Sharon teased. “How did it go?”

“Pretty well, I think,” Maggie said, showing the first sign of doubt. “I like him, you know.”

Sharon felt her heart go out to her. “I think that’s pretty clear,” she said. A massive Chinese dragon danced past, the only signs of the operators the legs under the massive silk monster. “What about them?”

Maggie laughed. “Some sadist in the immigration office decided to put many of the immigrants in the same place,” she said. “There are Chinese, Japanese and Filipino immigrants here, you know.”

“I never would have guessed,” Sharon said, as fireworks began to go off in the daylight sky. “Why?”

“I have no idea,” Maggie said. “There was a guy, a while back, who thought that if you stuffed everyone together, you would end up with something better, something uniquely...New Orleans. There was another guy, perhaps a bit more

practical, who thought that if you put the Japanese, Chinese and Filipinos together, they would dampen any desire on the part of the Spanish-descendants to head back to New Spain. The Filipinos, in fact, are rabid Empire-loyalists.”

Sharon considered the history of the Philippines and pinpointed the change. “Their homelands remained Spanish?” She guessed. “No rebellion?”

“Pretty much,” Maggie said. “The French took over when the Spanish joined the French Empire, pretty much against their will, and they were really unpleasant to everyone who wasn’t a Catholic. A lot of non-Catholics went to the Empire, mainly here. A lot more ended up on the west coast, mixing in better there.”

Sharon smiled as they finally reached one of the major government buildings. It was a black fortress, guarded by Marines. A massive British flag – the North American Union design – floated overhead, blowing back and forth in the breeze. A thought struck her and she blinked.

“What about the black slaves?” She asked. “What happened to them?”

Maggie smiled a bittersweet smile. “In the year of our lord 1852, a lot of people got the idea that slavery was a bad idea, and the year afterwards a large organisation began buying slaves and freeing them. Once actually trading in slaves was forbidden, it was only a matter of time before the slaves were all freed.”

She snorted. “At the same time, Ireland was under the British and remains so to this day,” she said. “The Irish are regarded as second-class citizens, even in their own country.”

Sharon winced. “And the Americans?” She asked. “How do they regard you?”

“As a woman,” Maggie said. “It’s always harder for unmarried women.”

Sharon changed the subject. “So, when are you and...Felix going to tie the knot?” She asked. “You both want each other, don’t you?”

“I think so,” Maggie said, as they reached the main doors. “Here’s where we go in.”

The Marine checked Maggie’s identity card and waved her in. He studied Sharon’s card from the *Washington* more carefully, checking it against a colour

printout that had to have come from the *Washington*, before allowing her in. By the standards of the *Washington's* forward deployment base in Japan, it was a very light check indeed.

They could smuggle bombers in here with ease, Sharon thought, and shuddered. She made a mental note to warn Admiral Jackson about the possible danger.

“So, what’s he like in bed?” She asked, as they entered the main foyer. “Is he any good?”

Maggie blushed bright red. “We don’t do that until we’re married,” she said. “I may be an independent woman, but I am not a common whore!”

The vehemence in her voice surprised Sharon. “Cool down,” she said. “What’s the big deal?”

Maggie scowled. “We’re meant to go virgin to our wedding night,” she said. “To be sullied means that you have done it before and...”

“Just like the bastard Taliban,” Sharon said. The Taliban – or perhaps their forerunners – had been crushed during the Afghanistan Proxy War in the new universe. “We’re really going to have to do something about it.”

Maggie didn’t answer, instead calling the lift. “Time to go upstairs,” she said. “I hate the censors. I’d almost sooner be groped in public, or have them looking up my skirt.”

Sharon grinned as the lift arrived. “Sooner you than me,” she said. “Remind me to tell you what I went through on my sorority welcome night.”

Maggie didn’t speak in the lift. Her face grew longer and longer as the lift proceeded upwards, finally reaching the fifth floor. Sharon followed her along a corridor that was ornate, finally reaching a secretary’s desk. The secretary, an Indian woman in a sari, looked up as they entered, greeting Maggie with a disapproving look – then staring openly at Sharon’s tight clothes.

“You are expected,” she said, in a voice that was pure cockney. The mixture was so astonishing that Sharon giggled; she glared at her without bothering to hide it. “You may enter.”

“Thank you,” Maggie said, and led the way into the office – and stopped. Sharon

stuck out her tongue at the secretary, and bumped into Maggie's back. "Admiral?"

Admiral Sir Joseph Porter nodded gravely at her as Maggie curtseyed. Sharon felt a flicker of bright annoyance at the abasement; she contented herself with a nod. Two other officers, one who couldn't keep his eyes off her breasts, nodded back to her.

"Please take a seat," Sir Joseph said, pulling a chair out for Maggie. The basic courtesy was unusual in Sharon's experience, but it seemed to fit in here. The horny officer pulled out a chair for her.

"Thank you," she said, taking a seat.

"Thank you for coming," Sir Joseph said, addressing Maggie. "I'm sorry about the delay; your office, for the moment, has accepted our explanation and our... responsibility for your lateness in filing." He paused. "It is unlikely that they will proceed with disciplinary action."

Maggie sighed in relief. "Thank you, sir," she said.

Sir Joseph smiled. "You're welcome," he said. His gaze flickered once to Sharon; Sharon had the idea that he was annoyed that she was there. "As the exclusive was yours, it would have been very embarrassing for them to have given you the sack." He smiled. "We have finally reviewed the report that you submitted."

Maggie looked apprehensive. Sharon couldn't wait. "And?"

Sir Joseph's eyes flickered again. "And the decision has been made that you can publish it," he said. Maggie sagged in relief. "While under normal circumstances we would insist on you removing some paragraphs, it has been deemed important that the entire report be published."

Sharon felt her ears prick up. If it had been *deemed*, she suspected that that meant higher authority. But who? Who had the authority to overrule Sir Joseph, if not the censors? Who would have made that decision?

"In fact, it has been decided that the report will be shared by all the newspapers," Sir Joseph said. He held up a hand to forestall objection. "While you won't have an exclusive on anything, which will be shared between all interested parties and papers, you will be paid for all publications – and you will continue to remain the official reporter attached to the...ah, *Washington*."

“Thank you, sir,” Maggie said. Sharon, who has listened to her worries that someone more senior would be sent in to take over, wondered exactly what was going on. “Sir...?”

“We have cleared the problem with your paper,” Sir Joseph assured her. “In fact, they have been leant on quite heavily, just to ensure that you remained on site. Your career has been made.”

“Thank you,” Maggie said again. Sir Joseph’s eyes flickered. “Can I go publish it now?”

“The department here will take care of the first publication,” Sir Joseph said. “Call it our support and compensation for keeping you waiting.”

Sharon’s mind worked furiously. This was *way* too much for one young rookie reporter, particularly one with the wrong plumbing to join the Old Boy’s Club. As much as she liked Maggie, she wasn’t sure why Maggie was getting all she had ever wanted, on a plate.

“However, we would like to talk to you alone for a few moments,” Sir Joseph said. Sharon’s eyes flew wide open. “Miss Green; please would you remain outside?”

Maggie looked up at Sharon, her green eyes hopelessly pleading. Sharon made her choice and stood up. “See you in five minutes,” she said. “I’ll just wait outside.”

Maggie, not for the first time, wished that Vice-Admiral Felix Anderson had proposed to her. She would have given half her life to be wearing an engagement ring; the last time she’d been in front of a review panel, she’d felt as if she’d been raped at the end of it. She knew that she knew nothing about what was really happening – and knew that that was a weakness.

I wish I was more like Sharon, she thought, and winced.

“I apologise for the theatrical nature of my actions,” Sir Joseph said. His voice remained calm. “Allow me to inform you that you are in no trouble.” Maggie didn’t relax. “In fact, you may be in a position to do your country some service.”

He opened a folder on his desk and passed her a series of photographs. The sheer quality of the colour images showed that they had come from the *Washington*, taken after the Battle of the Falklands. Nine superdreadnaughts, in various stages of destruction, lay in the middle of the Falklands Sound. Nine proud ships, reduced to scrap metal in minutes.

“I was there,” Maggie said. “I interviewed some of the captured Frenchmen.”

“We know,” Sir Joseph said. “That is in your first dispatch.”

There was...something in his tone. It was odd, a tone that she had never encountered before. If she hadn’t known better, she would have thought that it was fear. Coming to think of it...how did she know that it *wasn’t* fear?

“I included everything,” she said, wondering what was going on. Sharon would have demanded to know; she...didn’t have quite the guts to do that. “You have agreed to publish everything.”

“Oh, we will,” Sir Joseph said. “You must recognise, however, that this is a power that changes the entire global power balance – and shatters the established order.”

Sharon would have pointed out that the established order, the global stalemate, wasn’t very good anyway. Maggie...did not. Sir Joseph seemed to understand anyway. “These people are not...us,” he said. “They do not have the loyalty to the King-Emperor, or the United Empire, or even to the North American union. Their loyalty is to the United States of America, a nation that never existed on this world.”

Maggie closed her eyes. She’d read, once, a counterfactual novel written by a guy called Parry Garrison. In it, he had predicted that an independent America would have fought a civil war over slavery; something that Maggie was confident was nonsense. As technology had advanced, so too had the aversion to using brute-force labour.

*Except that Sharon’s world did indeed fight a civil war, she thought.
Coincidence?*

“That state does not exist,” she said, becoming aware that Sir Joseph was waiting for her to say something. “Even if they wanted too, they could not get back to it.”

“Perhaps,” Sir Joseph said. “I would not have believed these pictures unless I had

seen them with my own eyes. Tell me; what could a ship like the *Washington* do to the Royal Navies?"

Maggie felt her blood run cold. The ships of her semi-lover's fleet were still gathered near the *Washington*. She wondered, feeling cold fear trickling along her spine, just how strong the temptation had been to organise an attack from the *Amherst* and her cohorts, firing armour-piercing shells at point-blank range.

"It could certainly inflict a great deal of damage," she said, neutrally.

"Exactly," Sir Joseph said. "For reasons I cannot discuss with you yet, I have been ordered in no uncertain terms not to take any action against the *Washington*. However, it is vitally important that we keep a sharp eye on them – and learn how to duplicate their technology as quickly as possible. Sooner or later, their interests and ours will separate...and what we learn between now and then could make or break the North American Union."

Maggie shuddered. For the very first time in her life, she wished that she'd stayed in Ireland. "What exactly do you want me to do?"

"You have been granted access to the *Washington*," Sir Joseph said. "We want you to watch them, find out how they think and what they plan to do with themselves. We want you to learn as much as you can about their technology – nothing more."

"You want me to spy for you," Maggie said. "Don't you have other agents?"

"You're a trained newshound," Sir Joseph said wryly. "You might notice something that others might miss. We want you to learn about them; their culture and society, rather than anything else."

One of the other men, the one who couldn't keep his eyes off Sharon's chest while she was in the room, spoke for the first time. "It's your patriotic duty," he said. His voice was pompous, the voice of a man who never questioned.

"I don't know what to say," Maggie said. Her mind spun around, considering everything; her friendship with Sharon, her relationship with Admiral Anderson, the trust that the crew of the *Washington* had shown...and the possible consequences if the *Washington* and the North American Union found themselves on different sides.

Sir Joseph frowned. "We can, of course, offer a reward," he said. "Even without anything else, you would be the only reporter on the spot."

Maggie knew that she had no choice, not if she wanted to keep her career. "I'll do it," she said. "Now can I go get some lunch?"

The horny man looked shocked; Sir Joseph merely smiled. "Yes, you may go," he said, dismissing her with a word. "Good luck."

Maggie stood up, returned the folder of photographs, and left the room. Sharon and the Indian secretary were talking, discussing the need to liberate women from the male shackles placed upon them. To hear Sharon talk, men were only useful as sperm donors for babies, nothing else. Maggie wished that she were like her, just for a while, even though she liked the thought of spending the rest of her life with Anderson.

"Time to go," she said. She made a mental note to send the report to her paper through the telegraph anyway, just in case the Admiral forgot. "Come on," she said, when Sharon showed no inclination to leave the argument. "There's a large meal calling my name with growing urgency."

Sharon smiled and stood up, following her outside the door back to the lift. "What did they want with you anyway?"

Maggie felt like crying. "Nothing much," she said. "They just wanted to go over the security regulations, like the Official Secrets Act." She scowled. "Some of the information on your activities is going to be classified."

Sharon lifted an eyebrow. "The ones that you said you were required to memorise?"

Maggie smiled, trying to keep a brave face. "Exactly," she said. "The ones that we were required to memorise."

Chapter Nineteen: Mr Jackson Goes to Amherst

Amherst

North American Union (TimeLine B)

Under other circumstances, Admiral Jackson would have enjoyed the flight in the Sky King; it reassembled an old class of aircraft from the 1930s, but with improved passenger facilities. It reminded him of the nostalgic aircraft produced during the past few years of his world, reminding people of days long gone when the war showed no signs of coming to an end.

But there was work to do, so he put his personal feelings aside and opened his computer, attaching it to a transmitter and microphone. The cabin crew stared at it with open curiosity, but he ignored them. The connection was nearly perfect, although with far less bandwidth than he had once been used to, and the voice transmission was...suitable.

“Commander Hazelwood,” he said, as the face of the engineering officer appeared on the screen, holding the video link open. Commander Simon Hazelwood was one of the assistant engineers on the *Washington*, but also the commander of the small machine shops on the massive vessel. “I assume that you have a provisional report?”

Commander Hazelwood looked...excited and tired at the same time. His face was haggard, with a growing and very bushy beard that would have horrified any halfway respectable drill sergeant. His eyes were dim; he’d left his wife behind in the alternate universe, their home universe. Captain Morrigan had insisted on keeping him working hard, giving him no time to think.

“I’ve been inspecting the industrial city nearby in what would have been Florida,” Commander Hazelwood said. His voice was tired, hardly able to keep his eyes open, but Jackson could see his enthusiasm. “We might have underestimated them.”

Jackson lifted an eyebrow. “How so?” He asked. “They can produce weapons for us?”

“Cannon bullets and perhaps shells are possible,” Commander Hazelwood conceded. “However, they have a better tech base than I would have assumed

possible; they're already starting to work on transistors, once we suggested the idea."

"Only two weeks," Jackson said, shaking his head. "And their aircraft?"

"I think that we underestimated them," Commander Hazelwood said again. "Their tech base is higher than I thought, around 1940 levels."

Jackson looked at the aircraft interior, the one making final approach to Amherst, and smiled. "Perhaps," he said. "So...why don't they have massive bomber fleets?"

Commander Hazelwood smiled. "They seem to have...not bothered with an arms race until recently," he said. "They could build Lancaster bombers if they wanted, they just haven't managed to adapt their civilian technology to the war-making field. They've been building bombers now, but they don't seem to be keen to use them."

Jackson nodded. Anderson had commented that the semi-random bombing of London was more of an expression of frustration than anything else. Without the ability to push the war to a conclusion, the three powers would be getting very sick of the stalemate.

"On the other hand, they can certainly build tanks," Commander Hazelwood continued. "They'll be modified British designs from World War One for the most part, tanks designed for punching their way through trenches. With some help, they would be able to make it through the trenches and hammer their way south."

"Brilliant," Jackson said. "What about aircraft?"

"Oh, they were moving in that direction already," Commander Hazelwood assured him. "Now we've convinced them that aircraft actually do represent a serious threat to ships, they're working on building aircraft along the same lines of as the Liberty Ships of our World War Two. It shouldn't be much longer than six months before we're ready to move south against New Spain."

Jackson smiled, then sobered. "What about the German storm trooper tactics?" He asked. "Did Sally have something to say about that?"

"Not really worth the effort," Commander Hazelwood said. "Besides, the

Germans lost. Having that would hardly be worth the effort and loss of lives that would be involved in building such a force.”

“I hope you’re right,” Jackson said. He glanced out of the window; the city of Amherst was growing closer. “One last thing before I sign off, then,” he said. “What about the growing village?”

“We have around seven hundred people on shore,” Commander Hazelwood said. “No real problems so far, just a lot of depression. It’s sinking in, you know.” He smiled. “Apparently, a lot of North American Reporters were really cranky about all of the reporting being done by that Irish lass.”

Jackson snickered. “Fuck them,” he said. “There’s no massive pressure group to force me to show the world everything I have, and to ruin my career for one little death.”

“Yes, sir,” Commander Hazelwood said. He smiled. “*Our* reporter, Miss Green, may be reporting to the world at large as well. I think that the basic gist of information on our world will soon be out anyway.”

Jackson shook his head. “It hardly matters,” he said. “The leaders here – the ones I’m going to meet – know the truth. I don’t think that we can afford to conceal anything now.”

“Particularly since we need their food,” Commander Hazelwood said. “Hazelwood – out”

Jackson carefully put the equipment away, taking care not to damage it; it would be irreplaceable for years. He sat back in his seat as the aircraft landed on the small airport, so less active than anything in the United States of America. There were dozens of aircraft around, but none of them were jets, none of them were massive jumbo jets.

This world uses railways mainly, he thought, and frowned. The United Empire had been united by railways; the other two superpowers had been the same. Strategic manoeuvres that had been planned for years in the original timeline, a Russian march to India for example, would be possible here; time and ruthlessness had reduced the problem of the natives. Massing troops to march to India would be easy for the Russians.

He thought furiously as the aircraft opened its hatch, allowing him and Sergeant

Jack Hawksmore to leave the craft. A large car, painted black with golden patterns along the side, waited for him, with a man in a wig waiting for him. *Edmund Blackadder*, he thought, unable to keep the thought from his mind. The man was almost the spitting image of him.

“Admiral Jackson?” The man asked. “I’m Donald Adamson, special assistant to the Viceroy.”

Jackson offered his hand and was surprised when Adamson hesitated before taking it. “I’ve been ordered to take you directly to Government House,” Adamson said. “Do you require freshening up first?”

“I just need to wash my face,” Jackson said. “Can we do that on the way?”

Adamson nodded. “Admiral Sir Joseph Porter suggested that we loaned you a guide book for Amherst while moving to Government House,” he said. He passed over a small coloured book. “Coming?”

Amherst, according to the guidebook, had been founded in 1850, during the period when the various American Parliaments had been formed into the North American Union. Its first act of note – as evidenced by the massive black statue of a man freeing a slave – had been to ban slave trading within the North American Union, although not slave ownership. In 1853, despite some massive opposition from entrenched interests, it had provided limited funding for the Freedom Fund; buying slaves and arranging for them to have...well, forty acres and a mule.

So it was possible to do it without a war, Jackson thought, as the car passed through Amherst, heading for the centre of the city. Like its counterpart, Washington DC, Amherst had been named for the first ruler of the united American state, but it had a very different character. Unlike Washington DC, Amherst appeared to be quieter, with fewer cars and fewer pressure groups.

“Fascinating,” he muttered, studying the map in the guidebook. Amherst was divided into four sections; the government centre, the civil service, the industrial sector, and the housing estates. The city had clearly been planned by civil servants; the shops were nearly two miles from the houses.

“The British in our timeline have the same problem with their civil service designing the cities,” Hawksmore said, when Jackson commented on it. “There’s

very little individuality in the new towns they built in the 1990s.”

A massive castle loomed up in front of them, a heavy wall surrounding a building large enough to house thousands of people. Guards – unarmed, Jackson noted – patrolled the outskirts, waving to the people. An entire line of flags floated from the roof, American, British, Australian, Indian...all the flags of the United Empire.

Buckingham Palace, Jackson thought. The Government House was better designed, clearly designed to act as a fortress if needed, decorated in the style of a long-gone age. Further across the massive compound, he saw, a second palace – the Viceroy Palace – designed in a lighter style.

“Welcome to Government House,” Adamson said. “Please follow me.”

“The grand entrance,” Hawksmore muttered, as they passed through doors that could have permitted an F-18 to fly through them with extended wings. “We are honoured.”

Jackson ignored him. He had thought that the White House was grand; Government House really put it in the shade. A mixture of tastefulness and glamour decorated the interior; pictures hung on the walls. One of them, he was amused to notice, was of Benjamin Franklin.

“That man did a lot of the hard work in ending the war without major unhappiness,” Adamson muttered, as they passed through the security and headed up the stairs. “Not everyone thinks that he should be there.”

He paused in front of a massive set of doors, carved directly out of mahogany wood. “This is the Amherst Room,” he said. “The Viceroy and the Prime Minister are waiting for you.”

Jackson nodded. He hadn’t seen Adamson make any sign or signal, but he knew that the guards could have sent a warning. “Thank you,” he said. “What’s the procedure?”

“Wait here,” Adamson said. He stepped up to the door and tapped on a brass plate. The door opened and he stepped through, crying in a loud voice. “Admiral Christopher Jackson, my lords,” he said, then beckoned Jackson forward.

Jackson straightened his cap on his head and stepped inside. The room was ornate,

but comfortable; two men faced him, both wearing frilly wigs. He smiled; both of them looked like someone from the past, rather than modern-day Americans – or British. One of them wore fine clothes and looked uncomfortable; the other wore simpler clothes and looked comfortable.

“I think that we can do without the formalities,” the first man said. He spoke in a very pronounced British accent. “I’m Viceroy Benjamin Franklin X, Viceroy of the North American Union.”

Jackson lifted an eyebrow. The original Franklin had clearly played both sides of the field during the War of Independence. “And I’m Prime Minister Lord Roger Adams,” the second man said. His voice was more of the...American accent that Jackson was growing used to, although with a definite Cambridge hint in his voice. “I apologise for the delay in seeing you, Admiral but there’s been a... development.”

Jackson lifted an eyebrow. “There was no serious problems in the delay,” he said. “In fact, I was able to see to my crew and ship.”

Adams nodded. “I understand,” he said. “Admiral, what happened to the other ships in your original force?”

Jackson lifted an eyebrow. “Lost, we assume,” he said. “We’ve certainly seen no signs of them.”

The Viceroy spoke grimly, a hint of Oxford in his voice. “One of the ships has arrived in France,” he said. “The massive French carrier that was part of your force.”

Jackson felt as if he’d been punched in the stomach. “Are you certain of this?” He asked. “It could be a French lie designed to cover the loss of the Falklands to my ship.”

Adams passed over a small folder. “We have some agents in the Mediterranean,” he said. “Although the French are good with covering up events that happen within the sea, which they closed to all our traffic during the events that led up to war, we were lucky enough to be able to snap this picture. It was then smuggled over Spain and then onto a fishing boat.”

“Those fishermen only follow the laws when there are guns pointed at them,” the Viceroy commented.

Jackson opened the folder and examined the picture. It was clearly the *Charles de Gaulle*; the shape of the ship was unmistakable. The French ship didn't look as if it had been harmed and he scowled – the *Charles de Gaulle* had been carrying more people than it could have comfortably held, people with skills that the alternative French would need...if they wanted to match the *Washington*.

“That's the *Charles de Gaulle*,” he said grimly. “Shit.”

“That is why we were unwilling to have your ship attack the French ships in the Caribbean,” the Viceroy said. “Your weapons might be needed to face the French ship, with its strange name.”

“No need for him here,” Jackson said. He thought as fast as he could; had the French been honest about what the *Charles de Gaulle* was carrying? Did the ship carry a nuke? “That does pose something of a problem...”

“And they will know that you're here,” Adams said. “Admiral, what are you going to do about this?”

Jackson felt a white-hot flash of rage. “I didn't ask to come here and neither did the crew of the *Charles de Gaulle*, although *Contre-Admiral* François Videzun might have dreamed of a French Empire. Sir, I will attempt to help you, as best as we can.”

“Can your ship destroy the French ship?” The Viceroy asked. “If that's possible...”

“It's the knowledge that's dangerous,” Jackson said, although he knew it wasn't the complete truth. Damn it; what *was* the *Charles de Gaulle* carrying? “If they've had at least three weeks, and they arrived closer to home anyway, then they could have sent tons of information to the French. If their tech base is the same as yours...?”

“It is,” Adams confirmed.

“Then they can duplicate everything we've suggested, which could make things tricky,” Jackson said. He scowled; if they could be *certain* of destroying the *Charles de Gaulle*, then it was the best possible choice – except there was no longer anything like certainty. “Where is the *Charles de Gaulle* now?”

“In the Mediterranean,” Adams said. The Viceroy nodded. “Can you force your

way past Gibraltar?”

“The Mediterranean is a French lake here,” Jackson said thoughtfully, feeling a grim weight settling into his chest. “They have guns on both sides of the entrance...it would be tricky, even with our airpower. With unlimited ammunition, it could be done...”

“But you don’t have that happy circumstance,” Adams said.

“It’s an arms race then,” the Viceroy said. “How do you think that we should proceed?”

“We have to assume that the French can and will give their opponents everything we can give you,” Jackson said. “What about trying to assassinate *Contre-Admiral* François Videzun?”

The Viceroy’s mouth fell open. “We are not barbarians,” he said, in horror. “We don’t kill indiscriminately. The only times we can is when the person in question orders paroled prisoners to fight again, against the laws of war.”

Jackson frowned. How many serpents had entered the garden with the two carriers? How many other ships were out there? The entire task force? If a program of calculated assassination was out, then...

“We have to build up a force of tanks, quickly, and send them against New Spain,” he said. “As the only major point of contact between the two forces, it would be their main place to attack *us*.” He hesitated. “Do they have factories, automobile factories, in New Spain?”

Adams nodded, puzzled. “Of course,” he said. “Why wouldn’t they have?”

“French rule is clearly better than home rule for them,” Jackson muttered. “It doesn’t matter; the problem is that they will get the information back to New Spain...although if we could prevent them doing that...”

“They’ll have to send a heavily armed convoy,” Adams said. “We do have a good interception system; so far, they’ve only defeated our intentions by sending enough ships to risk a defeat or serious losses.”

“And then you don’t engage,” Jackson said. There was something appealing about such a system, far...nicer than anything in his own timeline. “What about

submarines?”

“We don’t send submarines against civilian ships,” Adams protested.

“The French will, and soon,” Jackson said. “It’s your Achilles Heel; your greatest weakness.”

“We will not usher in a new age of barbarism,” the Viceroy said firmly. “How do we proceed?”

“We develop our tanks and the new aircraft carriers, along with the new aircraft,” Jackson said. “If we convert some of the battlecruisers into aircraft carriers, we should be able to build up a force fairly quickly, then sweep the French from the seas. Once we improve the tactical bombing systems, we can defeat them in the Caribbean and the seas.”

“The French will be bound to sue for peace at that point,” the Viceroy said. “No one wants to fight forever, do they?”

The Jihadists do, Jackson thought. “Unfortunately, the French will be developing their own weapons,” he said. “They must not be allowed to beat us to the punch in New Spain. A land offensive might punch its way as far as New Orleans and that would be very bad.”

“You have a remarkable talent for understatement,” the Viceroy said. “The War Cabinet and the Imperial Parliament have made similar decisions; we will be producing new weapons as soon as the plans have been moved across the United Empire.”

Adams smiled. “We can grab Alaska,” he said. “I won’t let that go in the peace talks.”

The Viceroy smiled. Just for a second, Jackson saw the friendship that hid behind their official roles. “You always want Alaska,” he said. “You have the largest state in the United Empire, and you’re still not satisfied.”

“I’m greedy,” Adams said. He grinned. “Admiral, you’ll have all the support we can give you.”

“Thanks,” Jackson said. “If you don’t mind, however, I have to talk with my people. Perhaps we can do something about the *Charles de Gaulle*, if we put our

heads together.”

Chapter Twenty: Playing Chess with Death

USS *George Washington*

New Orleans, North American Union (TimeLine B)

There were no personnel from the alternate world, their new home, in the Admiral's quarters. Only the seven senior officers of the *George Washington* – and Sharon Green – sat in the large stateroom, listening to Admiral Jackson. The mood was grim, tainted with hope, fear...and a kind of depressing numbness. They knew, one and all, that they would never see their home again.

“The presence of the *Charles de Gaulle*, presumably including *Contre-Admiral* François Videzun adds a sudden change to the world,” Admiral Jackson said. His voice was firm; any doubts he had were pushed firmly underground. “We no longer have a monopoly on technology, to share or not as we chose.”

“They will do the same,” Morrigan said. The carrier captain scowled. “We...may have problems with the British and the British-Americans; *they* will get on fine with the French.”

Commander Talia Taylor, Navigator, coughed. “Will they?” She asked. Her grandparents had been French. “Many Frenchmen are very...devoted to the ideal of democracy, at least in their home country. Will all of the carrier crew go along with *Contre-Admiral* François Videzun?”

“Does it matter?” Commander Patrick O'Reilly growled. “They will follow his orders. The rewards that a grateful and ultra-powerful French Empire can bestow will make any...scruples they have seem like nothing. Think about it; the French of this era can set all of the crew, even the expanded crew, up with rewards that would make each and every one of them a lord. They could live lives of luxury and...”

“We get the point,” Admiral Jackson said. “So...what about the other ships?”

There was a moment of consternation. Morrigan put it into words. “The UFOs could have put them anywhere,” he said.

“We may also have a French spy on board,” O'Reilly said. “The security scans have been picking up...some kind of transmissions. Whatever they are, they

barely register on our systems.”

Jackson blinked. “How could a French spy have known that the *Charles de Gaulle* is here?” He asked. “Presumably they were as surprised as we were by the UFOs and our arrival here.”

“One would think so,” Morrigan agreed. “That said...if they’re not reporting to the French, then who are they reporting to?”

“Assuming they exist at all,” O’Reilly said. “God alone knows how they’re doing it; the most advanced sensor sweeps can only pick up hints of their presence.”

“A technology so far advanced over ours,” Lieutenant Sally Woods mused. More and more, she was becoming the *de facto* liaison with the shore-based people – and the Royal North American Navy. “Admiral, Captain, we have to force everything forward faster now.”

Jackson lifted an eyebrow. “Explain,” he said, although he understood. “Why must we move faster?”

Sally flushed at the sudden attention. “Having an idea is half of the problem,” she said. “The British made the first use of tanks in World War One, and by 1918 the Germans had a design of their one, several designs. Some of them were better than British designs.” She paused, her hands running over the map of Europe. “Now that that particular serpent is loose, the French will start working on the designs and building them.”

She paused for a long moment. “The same goes for submarines, aircraft carriers and aircraft,” she said. “Their technology is capable of duplicating many of the World War Two aircraft, from the Zero to the Hellcat; they just never thought of it. They could even build anti-tank weapons, if they know that there’s a pressing need to do so.”

O’Reilly shook his head. “There’s a long way between knowing that they need something and producing it,” he said. “How can they build them so quickly?”

Commander Simon Hazelwood snorted. “They have ironclad ships and their descendants,” he said. “These people are not playing with wooden-hulled ships. They have armour-piercing guns, ones designed to punch through hulls a lot harder than ours. If they know that they’ll be facing...land ironclads, with the warning they could find a counter.”

“Wonderful,” Jackson said. “Do we have anyone with serious tank experience on board?”

“A couple of Marines served in the 1st Marine Division during Iraq,” O’Reilly said. “They might be able to help.”

“Then speed is of the essence,” Jackson said. “At the same time...”

“Excuse me,” Morrigan said. The carrier captain had been thinking. “We have the weapons; we can go sink the *Charles de Gaulle* right now.”

Jackson scowled. If the French had been honest about what the *Charles de Gaulle* was carrying – and with the different information in different databases it was impossible to be sure – then he might have risked it. If the *Charles de Gaulle* were in the open sea, it would have been easy to have launched an attack...although perhaps not so easy to have sunk the ship.

“It’s in a locked sea,” he said, deciding that he would discuss his other worries later. “Our aircraft do not have the range to reach the *Charles de Gaulle* in Cyprus, which is where intelligence places it. The gateway is guarded by heavy guns, designed to prevent the British from forcing their way through, and we don’t have the sort of armour needed to survive. If we use up all our weapons to punch through...”

He didn’t spell out the possible consequences. At point-blank range, the *George Washington* would be quickly sunk by a French superdreadnaught. If they ran out of the weapons that could sink the French ships at very long distances, then that would be it.

“So sinking the *Charles de Gaulle* is out of the question,” he said. “Even if we did manage it, what next? The French will have shared their technology with the French here – and they’ll start work on their own tanks and aircraft.”

Commander Simon Hazelwood spoke into the silence. “We might be able to create a scratch force of tanks within three to four months,” he said. “They’re already building the items needed to make tanks; they only have to put them together. Anything else, the aircraft and the carriers for example, will take longer.”

Morrigan snorted. “How long for a carrier?” He asked. “One that’s actually useful?”

“A pity that the *Invincible* didn’t come through with us,” Commander Thomas Henderson, Weapons Officer, muttered. “It would be so much more useful than the *Washington* as an example.”

Hazelwood paused to consider. “Unfortunately, most of the conversion jobs in our timeline were done without urgency, so it’s hard to say for certain. The British, the Japanese and ourselves converted battlecruisers to aircraft carriers, but none of us were particularly rushed. Worse, building ships like that is not within my normal area of expertise.”

“And there’s only one nuclear reactor in America at the moment,” Jackson snapped, as the strain finally got the better of him. “You’ll have to adapt, same as the rest of us.”

“Yes, sir,” Hazelwood said. He didn’t react to Jackson’s sharp tone. “The shipwrights there, at least, have no major problems with duplicating the original *Essex* design, which probably means that the French will have no problems either. At a rough guess, best case scenario, we will have the first three carriers in four to six months; then purpose-built carriers within a year.”

“Wonderful,” Jackson muttered. “What about aircraft?”

“Those are hardly a problem,” Hazelwood assured him. “They just needed a few ideas. We’ll have more aircraft than we know what to do with in a few months.”

“No such thing,” O’Reilly said wryly. “I assume that the French have the same capabilities?”

“It’s hard to answer that question,” Sally said, when Hazelwood looked at her. “Intelligence suggests that the French have the same basic amount of shipbuilding, but other problems as well, such as the need to build monitors to hammer Russian positions in the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea. They have a roughly equal number of superdreadnaughts, but in the absence of a canal linking the two seas together, they have been avoiding confrontations between their fleets and the Royal Navies.”

Jackson scowled. Sorting out the exact degree of authority and power within the United Empire was extremely difficult; it was as if each state within the United States had decided to build its own navy, rather than have a united navy. Where did the Royal Navy leave off and the Royal North American Navy begin?

Perhaps it's designed to make a second civil war impossible, he thought, and shuddered.

"So they'll be looking for a silver bullet," Hazelwood said. "We must assume that they will begin a crash program too."

Sharon Green spoke for the first time. "You're talking about meddling in their internal affairs," she said. "What happens if they refuse to turn all their shipyards over to manufacturing carriers and submarines?"

"A submarine might be able to penetrate the Mediterranean," Morrigan said. "They don't seem to have sonar."

"They will once the French suggest it," Hazelwood said. "The technology is hardly beyond their grasp."

I may have to offer Sharon the job of intelligence work, Jackson thought. "I understand your point," he said, looking at Sharon. "I think it's time that we recognised a certain reality – we're stuck here."

"So you have said before," Sharon said, the only person who could have pointed that out. "We can't get back and this world doesn't have the tech needed to send us back."

"*Exactly*," Jackson said. His voice darkened. "We cannot fly to Mars and escape," he said. "We cannot find a nice uninhabited island and set up home there. We are committed; we were committed in some ways from the moment we attacked the Falklands, but the presence of the *Charles de Gaulle* means that we're truly committed. The French will hate us – and they will come for us."

O'Reilly glared around the table. "Let them try," he said.

"Once we run out of bombs and missiles, we're fucked," Henderson said. "We could hold out for a while alone, but not forever."

Jackson nodded. "We have to make this...alliance work, people," he said. "That means spending more time ashore and helping them to develop as fast as possible."

There was a long pause. Sharon broke it. "With all due respect, there are very few roles for women here," she said. "Roughly a third of your crew is female,

Admiral; will they all accept second-class citizenship?”

“Hell, no,” Morrigan snapped. “Why should we ask our own women to give up their hard-won freedoms? If they don’t like it, Admiral, let them change their damn customs.”

“Introducing contraception might help with...loosening the shackles,” Sally said. “That would, of course, leave us – and them – with other problems.”

“None of which are *our* problems,” O’Reilly said. “They would have stumbled upon tanks, aircraft carriers and other things later – their technology was already moving in that direction.” He sighed. “War always pushes development forward.”

“But we will be blamed for those problems,” Sharon said. “We’re a very tiny minority of people; only six thousand and five hundred souls on board.”

Jackson tapped the table. “Does anyone else see a *reasonable* course of action, other than throwing our lot in with the United Empire?”

There was a long silence. It grew and lengthened. No one spoke. “Then we’re committed,” Jackson said. “We will have to make this alliance work.” He looked around the table. “Commander O’Reilly; I want you to find a way of destroying the French carrier.” O’Reilly nodded. “Captain, you and I are going to have to plan our actions in the Caribbean.”

Morrigan nodded. “Yes, Admiral,” he said. “We already have images from some of the French bases.”

Henderson coughed. “We have seven long-range recon drones,” he said. “We could spare one and send it to Britain, using it to scout over France for the *Charles de Gaulle* and whatever they’re introducing into the French arsenal. Hell, we could send them an AWACS; if they could fuel it, it would be very helpful.”

Jackson smiled. “That’s what I’m looking for,” he said. “Any more ideas?”

Sally held up her hand. “If we want to remain...well, American,” she said. “We should ask them for Cuba, once we conquer it. A sort of base of operations.”

Jackson considered it. In the original timeline, Cuba’s population had been around eleven million. In this strange world, there were only two million natives, mainly worked to death by Spanish, who were in turn ruled by the French. As a base for

French activities, it was a pain in the United Empire's collective neck.

"If we can take it for them, then yes, that's a good idea," Jackson said. "A place that we can be ourselves, rather than their...wizards."

"We may still have to be part of the United Empire," Sally said. "Even if they were willing to permit us to remain independent, we would be better off being part of the Empire."

"It's an interesting idea," Anderson said, afterwards. The two admirals – Anderson had been promoted after the Falklands – sat together in Jackson's cabin. "You do realise, of course, that we are not in a position to simply *give* you Cuba?"

Jackson felt, again, a feeling of sadness at what they and the French had introduced into this world. America's long history of broken promises had cost them dearly; the United Empire seemed based on honesty and truthfulness...and integrity. They might be bastards, sometimes, but they were honest bastards.

"It's still in French hands," Jackson said wryly. "You could play at giving us Caesar's Gift, I suppose, but..."

Anderson blinked. "George's gift?"

"Never mind," Jackson said, dismissing the quote. Introducing the comic books to the United Empire could wait until after the war had been won. "Naturally, we would help you to capture it."

Anderson lifted an eyebrow. "You do know, of course, why previous attempts have failed?"

Jackson nodded. The superdreadnaughts on both sides had been reluctant to risk a direct clash, leaving it to the smaller ships on both sides. Neither side had been willing to risk a direct, all-out attack, preferring to raid, harass and occasionally launch a minor invasion. Jamaica had changed hands three times in the past year; Cuba had only been raided, mainly because of the large garrison on the island.

"We have the aircraft and men we need," Anderson said. "Once your aircraft are ready, we can proceed against the French at Panama." He paused. "If we destroyed the Panama Canal, then..."

“They would have some problems all of a sudden,” Anderson said. Jackson smiled; Anderson was as aggressive as Morrigan. “The problem, of course, is destroying it.” He frowned. “We would have to reopen it as quickly as possible; the generals in charge might want to wait until the army is ready to move.”

“The army does insist on primacy on the land,” Jackson said crossly. “We could build a proper Marine division here, you know.”

“That would *really* annoy the Royal Marines,” Anderson said. “They do all the water-land war; they have a monopoly on it.”

Jackson shrugged. “We can handle turf fights later,” he said. “What do you think of the other idea?”

“Giving you people somewhere to live?” Anderson said. “I rather think that the Mayor of New Orleans was hoping that you would stay here – you bring him revenue for his city and more mentions in the newspapers. Did you read his interview in the *Daily Paper*? He thinks that you’re the best thing since the superdreadnaught.”

Jackson chuckled. “There’s going to be friction,” he said, predicting with gloomy certainty. “We have values that you lack.”

Anderson smiled. “There always is,” he said. “I’ve been on exercises in India, where there are occasionally friction between us and them, mainly over women.” He smiled again. “They have brothels too, but their authorities don’t even reluctantly accept that they might exist, so they deny everything when asked.”

Jackson lifted an eyebrow. “What is the status of women there?” He asked. “It wasn’t always good in my world, let alone yours.”

“The same as the rest of the world, officially,” Anderson said. “There are some families that keep to the old ways.” He frowned. “And, occasionally, a woman from Afghanistan runs to India to escape her menfolk.” He paused. “But seriously, it’s an interesting idea. I’ll have to mention it to Admiral Sir Joseph Porter and the government here.”

He sighed. “The first priority, however, remains the *Charles de Gaulle*,” he said. “That sudden source of ideas for the other side means that we have to act faster.”

“I know,” Jackson said. “You know that we no longer have the luxury of

preparing at leisure?”

“I gathered that,” Anderson said. “Convincing everyone to work faster is going to be a pain. Workers had it when you ask them to work harder; they get ill and so on.”

Jackson scowled. “What about Ordinary Seaman Fortson?”

“Transferred him to a destroyer,” Anderson said. “After the flogging, he probably won’t try that again.” He paused. “I think that the lesson about your female crewmen will have sunk in.”

“Crewwomen,” Jackson corrected absently. “How are you getting along with that reporter women, Maggie...what’s her name?”

Anderson blushed; Jackson smiled inside. “I think that it’s going well,” he said. “I’m thinking of asking her to marry me and spend the rest of my life with her.”

“That’s good,” Jackson said. He smiled. “Have fun with her and spend as much time as you can with her.” He winked. “We can even provide you with some contraception, if you want.”

Anderson lifted an eyebrow. “Why do you care?” He asked. “I thought you had a don’t ask, don’t tell policy?”

Jackson sighed. “There’s a lot I wish that I’d said to my wife,” he said. “And now, I never will.”

Anderson nodded in sympathy. “She might have been born here,” he said. “Perhaps you could look...?”

“I doubt it,” Jackson said. “The history of this world is so different that it’s unlikely that there are any...counterparts here at all.”

Interlude Two: The Pattern of Time

Imagine; if you can, that the universe moves along a stream of events, from A to B to C to D...and all the way until the big crunch, or Event Two, as the handful of races to step outside the multiverse call it.

That is, of course, completely untrue.

For every event, there are a number of possible events. For humans, limited to only perceiving one reality – at least one *real* reality – it is impossible to do more than imagine what might have been. For those standing outside the timelines, they can see how each potential...Point of Divergence causes a...weakness in the time stream. During those moments, intervention is possible, perhaps even required.

Again, that is a gross simplification.

The sheer...irrelevance of many possible Points of Divergence means that there might be a slight...hiccup in the timeline, but not the formation of a new – and separate - reality. If, for example, you put your right sock on first, instead of your left sock, it makes only a tiny flicker in the timeline. It very...very...very rarely matters to the universe at large what sock you put on first. It simply isn't important. The same goes for what you might do each day; it simply isn't important. Very few events in the life of an individual person cause more than a slight flicker.

(Ironically, for reasons best not probed into, the only clothes-related event that *does* have a major effect, at least for humans, is what sort of panties a girl wears. It's just one of those things best not looked at too closely.)

What happens, whenever a Point of Divergence is formed, is that the timeline forks briefly, and then merges back into itself. Each such event provides a weakness, but very few of them are important. As the crew of the *George Washington* discovered, one of the events that was truly important was the Battle of Long Island; in fact, the timeline that has a British victory – erasing the United States of America from history – is more...prominent than one that permits the United States to exist. The timeline that birthed the crew of the *George Washington* is one of the rarer timelines – it is also one of the most important.

The reason that there are not thousands of universes is generally described, to the few people with the limited capabilities of base-line humans who are lucky

enough to catch a glimpse of the multiverse, to be similar to Chess. There are twenty possible opening moves in Chess – but all, but four of them are useless. History tends to follow the practical courses, rather than the million to one chance. Hitler only launches Operation Sealion in one out of ten universes – and succeeds only in a hundred out of the timelines with a launched attempt.

And if you can grasp beings that operate on that sort of scale, then perhaps you can understand what happens next.

The echoes had fallen slightly as the...viewpoint moved firmly onto the altered timeline. It took an event of *colossal* power to change a timeline, particularly without attracting attention. Destroying the timelines, perhaps by rerouting an asteroid thousands of years ago, was possible; that happened all the time.

“It’s not enough,” the first figure said. A human – if one could have stood to exist in the echo room – would have classed him as frustrated. “The changes are not enough.”

The second figure might have smiled. It was impossible to tell. “Change is operating very slowly,” she said. Her voice was soft and warm. “They will change...”

“But will they change in time?” The first figure asked. “Time is running out.”

“If we intervene more, we might attract attention,” the second figure reminded him. “The enemy will not be so...inclined to spare this world; you know that.”

The first figure said nothing. The enemy had many ways to destroy a world, from an ‘accidental’ intersection with an antimatter cloud to a reality-bender, which would have destroyed the entire universe through its contamination. Destroying a world outright prevented the possibility of detection by the forces of...good, preventing them from locating and identifying the enemy.

“We cannot correct what we have done, nor can we intervene further outside the timeframe,” the second figure said. She moved to the other side of the echo room. “If we could look into the future...”

“I have,” the first figure said. Senses that humans could not have comprehended read his companion’s shock. “It is still...unacceptable.”

“If we intervene further, we might trigger the use of non-Contemporary energies,” the second figure said. “You risk everything...”

“We must intervene,” the first figure said. “Fortunately, we can limit the change...”

The ships of the task force, suspended out of time, appeared above them. The representations were the ships themselves, spinning slowly outside of time and space. “That one...and that one,” the first figure said. “Perhaps that one as well.”

“This will cause a flowering effect,” the second figure said. “If we do this...”

“We have no choice,” the first figure said. The three ships vanished, heading *down* back to the altered timeline. Floating outside of time and space, the figures watched, wondering what would happen...and waited...

Chapter Twenty-One: Cold World

Iron Palace

Moscow, Russian Empire (TimeLine B)

Snow howls across a landscape that is as desolate as any part of Earth, criss-crossing and covering and re-covering the ground, freezing and becoming almost part of the ground. In the semi-darkness that was the perpetual state of the world near the Artic, it is hard to see your way, even with the lights that modern technology can provide. The handful of people who somehow eke out a living in the region live on the edge of starvation, constantly at risk of freezing to death.

The shapes can be made out in the darkness, three hard angular shapes. If the natives had waited a little longer to investigate the shapes, perhaps the history of the world would have been very different. As it happened, the natives braved the freezing cold to look closer and closer...and then they saw the lights and felt the warmth, impossibly warm for the far north of Russia.

Their curiosity was their undoing. Even as they climbed close enough to see what the shapes truly were, one of them returned to their camp and sent a radio message to Prince Rudolf, the head of the Tsarist Secret Service. For a long time, the Secret Service was uninterested, convinced that the superstitious people of the far north, who believed in snow giants and only bowed to the Tsar when watched by the regime's security service, were dreaming. But then the first reports of the *George Washington* came in through Alaska.

And then the Tsarist Secret Service got very interested indeed...

Colonel Ivan Petrovich had expected to face a man like Stalin, or perhaps the last ill-fated Tsar, rather than the man who faced him in the throne room. He'd thought that he'd understood Tsarist protocol, but he'd been wrong, fortunately discovering that before bowing before the Tsar. The Tsarist Secret Service had warned him...anyone who showed the slightest sign of disrespect was killed, often after being tortured first.

In person, Tsar Nicolas XX seemed almost like one of the Tsar's that Petrovich had been told about in storybooks...before the Communists killed the last Tsar,

who had been a pretty uninspiring man. His massive barrel chest, larger than any Petrovich had seen before, was all muscle – even in the cold Iron Palace he was half-naked. He wore a suit of armour that would provide little protection to someone with a modern gun...and his eyes glinted with madness. The red tint to his hair was worrying; where had that come from?

Peter the Great, he thought, and shivered.

As soon as the Tsar took notice of him, Petrovich prostrated himself like a Muslim praying to Allah, a humiliating prostration before a living man. The handful of surviving Russians had all been brought to Moscow, which had become the capital of the darker Russian Empire. Their...minders had seen to it that they'd been fed, but they'd been kept under house arrest.

Petrovich kept the smile from his face, almost losing track of where he was. The Russians hadn't been sure how to treat them, so they'd given them wine and women. He'd had a woman from Poland – or what had been Poland in the original history – one who'd proven herself to have been a history teacher. That was, of course, before the instruments of repression caught on...and sold her into slavery. She'd managed to tell him what had happened, even though she lacked the knowledge to allow him to work out the exact change in history.

The Tsar's foot reached out, bare naked, and pressed down on the back of his head. Completely at the Tsar's mercy, Petrovich could only pray, smelling the smell of unwashed feet and feeling the cold hard floor under his face.

"You may rise," the Tsar said. Petrovich had been informed about that; he sat back on his haunches and looked down. Hardly anyone ever stood when facing the Tsar. "The reports from France do not encourage me."

Petrovich said nothing. The...event that had dropped them on Russia – literally – had been more benevolent to the other two ships – the only ones that they knew about. The Tsar had thousands of spies in France; it hadn't taken long to work out what the Russians were doing, using the crew of the *Charles de Gaulle* to build new weapons.

"We will not permit a technology gap," the Tsar said, using the royal 'we.' He seemed only to use it when he remembered to use it. "The Father God has given you to Our Royal Person."

"I live only to serve," Petrovich said, thinking rapidly. One thing was clear; there

was no possible escape, not in the middle of a tyranny worse than Stalin's. For the moment, he would have to play along – until escape became possible.

“We have only two hundred and seventeen people from the...opposite world,” the Tsar said. “I will not lose my country to socialists!”

The last word was a curse. Petrovich wondered who had been brave enough to tell the Tsar about the fate of his line in the other world. The Russian submarine and landing craft might have been able to conceal the truth, but the remains of the American ship had held some of the information.

“You will help Us,” the Tsar said. “It will be your task to make us equal to the newcomers before they attack Us.”

His voice was icy; perhaps he already understood some of the possible consequences. “Your Majesty,” he stammered, “it will be impossible to duplicate every system on the ships.”

He'd thought about it, wishing that he knew more about the technology base of the alternate Russia. Nuclear power seemed beyond their grasp – and he had privately decided to do whatever it took to ensure that the Tsar never gained nuclear power. His own service, as a commander of the Russian addition to the task force, was on land...which gave him some advantages.

“But you can use some of the equipment on the American ship,” the Tsar stated. It wasn't a question. “If you were to use it...”

Petrovich sighed. Whatever event had dropped them in the far north of Russia had done so nearly three weeks after the event that had brought the two carriers into the alternate world. By the time the tribesmen had stumbled upon them, the crew of the American transport were dead of exposure...and the Russian soldiers were down to only two hundred, not counting the crew of the submarine. They had added an extra seventeen to the number, cowering around the nuclear plant and praying for salvation.

“My men are not trained on the American equipment,” he said. “The Abrams tank alone requires fuel, which was not carried on the ship and may be impossible to duplicate here...”

“We expect you to solve those problems, or your men will answer with their heads,” the Tsar said. “The crew of the French ship are already helping their

people; I will not fall behind or it will mean the death of Our Empire, the one that has been oppressed by the British and the French!”

Petrovich sighed inwardly, careful to keep that from his face. From reading between the lines, the Tsar had started the war –and now couldn’t end it. His plan seemed to be to hammer away at the enemy and see who broke first...and if the French were armed with superior weapons, they would be able to defeat the Russians. If the Tsar was as popular with the common people as Petrovich suspected he was, the uprisings would destroy him.

I wish that we could contact the Washington, he thought grimly, and knew that it was useless. The Tsarist Secret Service had been quick to separate his men from their ships and weapons, already allowing designers to pore over the ships in their icy tomb. The American ship would be unable to help...

“It will require time,” he said. “We will have to build a force trained to use the American equipment. We will also have to build tanks of our own, and perhaps even anti-tank weapons.” He paused, hoping that the Tsar was as paranoid as Stalin. “We will also have to hack into the American tanks control units, just to ensure that there are no...programs designed to react badly to us using them.”

The Tsar scowled. “Your people will fight for Us,” he said. “Your soldiers will train other soldiers; you yourself will assist with the building of new weapons. That is our royal command.”

Petrovich prostrated himself again. “It shall be done,” he said, from his position on the ground. These people had the technology to heat the Iron Palace; why didn’t they do it? The entire place – which had never existed in his Russia – was built like a fortress; were peasant revolts common?

“Of course it shall,” the Tsar said. “You have Our leave to depart Our presence.”

Petrovich carefully hid his reaction as he banged his head against the ground three times, and then crawled out of the room, never lifting his eyes to the Tsar. The crawling was...unnatural; Stalin had never demanded anything like that from his people. As soon as the iron doors had closed on the Tsar’s palace, he stood up, rubbing his knees.

“Your Highness,” a man said. Petrovich looked around sharply, to see a tall bearded man with long white hair. “I am Stefan.”

Petrovich studied him thoughtfully. “What are you?” He asked. “What are you doing here?”

“I am a Court Jew,” Stefan said. There was a lifetime’s worth of bitterness hidden in his face, in his voice, in the way he moved. It had been a life spent in service; the marks of frequent beatings showed in the gentle, careful, way he moved. “It is my task to serve you now.”

Petrovich considered. “Thank you,” he said finally. “The first order of business is to see what I have to work with. I need full details on the Empire, and on the other powers, and then I have to get some kind of feel for the technology here.”

Stefan’s eyes flickered. “The first place would be the library there,” he said. “I will guide you there.”

The Iron Palace had a library, an oaken room lit with flickering torches rather than electric lighting. Petrovich was impressed, even as Stefan brought him the first few books and guides, some written in the Russian alphabet, others written in a version of English or French. Stefan translated for him when he didn’t understand; he read English well, but the English here seemed to be different.

“How different,” he mused, as he went through a history tome, one prepared by an order of monks who served the Eastern Pope. Unlike Stalin, the Tsar and his ancestors had clearly seen fit to co-opt the Church, using it to support their rule. The Church, according to Stefan, would be quite happy to burn all the Jews in Moscow at the stake – and the moment they stopped being useful to the Tsar, that was what would happen to them.

He shook his head and read on, trying to see through the self-serving and Tsar-serving claims in the history books. The Russian Empire had never been invaded by Napoleon; they had been allied with the French during the Global War. Instead, they had divided Europe between them, promising eternal peace and friendship forever. It had lasted for nearly two hundred years. Instead of playing politics with Europe, the Tsars had expanded eastwards when the railway was invented, forcing their way through sheer bloody-mindedness, reaching the border of China and Korea.

There had been no war with Japan, no attempt to seize China. The three powers had carved China up into spheres of influence, something that had lasted for years

until the Chinese Empire finally collapsed. Instead of a persistent nibbling away at the Ottoman Empire, the three powers had milked it...until the pressure got too high for the Ottomans to survive. In the division, the French had cheated the Russians – or the Russians believed that the French had cheated them – and sown the seeds for the global war.

“But what is life like here?” He asked Stefan, who shook his head slightly, before passing over a black volume. It was labelled in gold, marked in an alphabet that Petrovich didn’t recognise. “What’s this?”

Stefan spoke in a hushed voice, his mouth close to Petrovich’s ear. “That book is censored and banned by the power of Mother Church and the Tsar,” he said. “The copy here is the only one in existence – officially.”

Petrovich nodded. Even post-Soviet Russia was not unfamiliar with censorship. “What’s the language?” He asked. “Is it all in...whatever?”

“It’s entitled in Japanese,” Stefan said. “The rest is in Russian.”

Petrovich blinked, resolving to enquire why later, and opened the book. The author wrote in a crisp, no nonsense style, detailing horrors. The majority of Russia’s inhabitants were serfs, working for the boyars and nobles on their farms, or slaving in their factories. Education was minimal, mainly consisting of religious instruction and brainwashing, done at the command of the Tsar. There was an example of a religious primer and he shuddered – it seemed unbelievable.

Question; how should we show our respect for the Tsar?

Answer: we should feel complete loyalty to the Tsar and be prepared to lay down our lives without question. We should trust that he works for us all, and therefore obey his every command and obey the authorities he appoints without question. A man who does not obey the Tsar, who is appointed by God, is damned forever.

“Fuck me,” Petrovich breathed, in English. Stefan gave him a sharp look. “They actually believe this?”

“A lot do, yes,” Stefan said. “Don’t discuss it, not here.”

Petrovich scowled and carefully passed the book back to Stefan. “Now, what about technology?”

Stefan passed him an engineering paper, a long report that seemed to have been written around 1900, from the writing. It spoke in glorifying terms of how the Tsar had boosted Russian production; reaching heights that Petrovich suspected were impossible. It wasn't the...self-glorifying reports that the Communists had published, but the idea was the same – something to justify all of the suffering.

Suddenly, his head spun, and he leaned against the table. He'd thought that cowering in the ship, having connected the nuclear submarine's power core to the *Stalingrad*, had been bad. Then...they hadn't known what had happened to them, they had expected rescue at any moment. Now...he was trapped in a Russia out of his nightmares.

"You might want to spend more time with my daughter," Stefan said, his voice hopeless and bleak. Petrovich blinked at him. "That girl they sent to you..."

Petrovich felt a flicker of shame. "I'm sorry," he said. No words could be used. "I'm..."

"The first Russian to apologise to a Jew for anything," Stefan said. His tone was grim, his face torn in agony. "Stay with her, *please*." Petrovich stared at him. "If you throw her from your room, they'll rape and kill her, or send her to the harem, just for failing in her duty."

"I'll take care of her," Petrovich promised. Stefan might just make a valued ally. "Now, tell me more about this world."

The quarters that had been provided for him were luxurious, seeing that the Tsar seemed to have decided that he could be useful. Like the rest of the Iron Palace, it was lit by lamps and warmed by coal fires, rather than any form of central heating. The room was depressing, with stone walls and no windows, but it was private. Whatever else the Tsar's people might have invented, Petrovich was certain that they would not have managed to make electronic surveillance devices.

"It's true, then," Engineer Grigorovich said. The former Chief Engineer of the *Putin*, Russia's latest and greatest nuclear submarine, was the highest-ranking surviving officer; no commanding officers had survived. His fat body, against regulation, disgusted Petrovich. "We are in the past."

"Not the past," Petrovich said. His tone was grim. "This is an alternate universe,

like those *World War* movies.”

Grigorovich smiled. “I saw those,” he said. His face fell. “We’re stuck here, aren’t we?”

Petrovich nodded and ran through the information he’d found about the Russian Empire of 2009, timeline B. “I don’t think we have a choice,” he said. “Some of us, my people, will be fighting for them. Others, like you, will be building ships for them.”

“I can build a submarine, if they give me the equipment,” Grigorovich said. “I don’t think that I could build a nuke boat, but with some effort...”

“Let’s try and avoid clogging up this Russia with radiation,” Petrovich said sharply. He hoped that Grigorovich was smart enough to get the hidden meaning. No point in risking too much, after all. “For the moment, work on conventional things. We’re going to be a long way behind the French, after all.”

Grigorovich lifted an eyebrow. “What about...?”

“Contacting the *Washington*?” Petrovich guessed. Grigorovich nodded. “I don’t think that that’s possible,” he said. “Until then, leave it unmentioned, ok?”

Grigorovich stood up. “If I’m to help them develop a modern military, then I’d better get to bed,” he said. “That Polish whore is...”

“Be nice to her,” Petrovich snapped. He held the engineer’s eyes. “She might end up an ally.”

Grigorovich saluted and left the rooms. Petrovich waited for a few moments, and then entered the small kitchen. The Iron Palace was so large that each apartment was more like a Moscow flat than anything else. Rebecca stood there, cooking something that smelt tasty, her blonde hair running down her back. A single slave band ran around her neck, reminding everyone of her status.

She doesn’t look like a Jew, he thought, and smiled. With pale skin, long blonde hair and blue eyes, Rebecca looked more like a German princess than a Jew. She looked up at him and managed a smile, perhaps fearing that she would be taken at once, or beaten.

“Thank you,” he said, and saw her eyes open wide. “How long until dinner?”

He kept his voice as soft and pleasant as he could, and was rewarded with a smile. “Around half an hour,” she said, her eyes lowered. “Master...”

“Thank you,” he said, and left the kitchen. He had work to do, convincing her to trust him, but it would take time. He smiled suddenly; only a few days in the Palace, and he was already plotting the overthrow of the Tsar. It had to be a record.

Chapter Twenty-Two: The Changing Face of War

Fort Robertson

North American Union (TimeLine B)

The vehicle moved carefully off the train wagon, blowing out smoke as it came onto the ground, then started to move into the main area of Fort Robertson – one of the major barracks near the New Spain border. Three miles to the south, the beginning of the disputed territory began...a stretch of land five miles wide where neither side was strong enough to establish dominance. After the slaughters of the first months of war, uneasy stalemate had resulted...until now.

“It doesn’t look that impressive,” Colonel Crenshaw said. The Marine commander, the first commander to have any experience with war in the alternate world, had been selected as the main commanding officer, although both the Army and the Militia had thrown up their collective hands in horror at the thought of a *Marine* commanding the New Model Army.

Colonel Sir Benjamin Phillips shrugged. “We fired a machine gun at that...unimpressive vehicle at almost point-blank range, mate,” he said. He ignored Crenshaw’s snort. “As you can see, it didn’t put it off its lunch.”

The driver, a Contemporary who had used to drive the fleet of lorries that reinforced any penetrations before it became obvious that there would be hardly any on the Southern Front, swung the vehicle around. Its left tread spun madly, turning it around to face the two commanding officers.

Crenshaw laughed. Someone – perhaps the driver himself – had painted a picture on the front; an angry mouth opening wide. Machine guns poked out of the front, two more poked out of each side, moving around on their own.

“This design is not intended to handle other tanks,” Sir Benjamin said. “We expect, now that the French have their own allies from the *Charles de Gaulle*, that we will see French tanks, sooner rather than later.”

“You should have attempted to sink that ship,” Crenshaw said. The *Charles de Gaulle* had remained in its location, well out of range of an airstrike from the *George Washington*. “Those bastards have been doing the exact same thing in France, you know.”

Sir Benjamin shrugged. He understood the argument; the Royal Navies had argued backwards and forwards about it for the five months since confirming the existence of the French carrier. In the end, though, he understood Admiral Jackson's point; they had only one super-carrier themselves – it would be folly to risk it, whatever the cause. If both carriers were removed from the balance, then all the knowledge would be lost...and no one knew what had happened to the rest of the task force. Might the Japanese ships have gone to Japan? Might the German ships have gone to the Prussian Congo?

And Russia? There had been two Russian ships in the task force; a submarine and a troop transport. Where were they?

“We've had that debate before,” he said, suddenly reluctant to press forward. Radar from the *George Washington's* AWACS, moved to Britain at the request of the Royal Flying Corps, had detected French aircraft moving with greater power and capability, the result of suddenly having the plans to build better aircraft. “If we expend all our weapons, then the carrier is helpless.”

Crenshaw shrugged. “I assume that you know what you're taking about,” he said. “How many of these tanks are there?”

“The plan is for thousands,” Sir Benjamin said seriously. “These are exciting times, Colonel; there are three more designs under production even now. One designed for anti-tank work, one designed for limited amphibious work, and even one designed for faster work than this one, which is meant for clearing trenches.”

Crenshaw nodded. “I have the dummy trench ready,” he said. “Let's see how well it works.”

Sir Benjamin nodded and waved to the driver, lifting a small radio, only about the size of a field telephone, to his lips. “Scott, how about you showing us what you can do?”

The *Churchill* – named for a statesman who had never existed in the alternate world - had seven crewmen on board; the driver, the mechanic, the radioman and four gunners. Captain Scott Martin, the driver and commander, loved his tank, even though he knew that it would be a death trap if the enemy managed to punch through the armour plates on the front.

“Let’s roll,” he said, as the signal came in. Thousands of new factories had appeared across the North American Union, converting a host of amateur radio enthusiasts to producing the small radios that were installed in each tank. He wasn’t sure that he bought the explanation for developing so many radio systems and installing them in the tanks – had they never heard of the commander directing operations from the rear? He’d watched the videos from the other timeline, but he didn’t really understand.

“Rolling,” the radioman said. “The command is to take that trench.”

Martin took control of the tank and started the engine, moving forwards slowly, peering through a periscope at the trench. It was a fairly standard trench for the front; despite its singular name it was actually three separate trenches, interwoven with gun positions and artillery pads.

“We’re moving,” he said, as the tank closed in on the trench. A series of sparks erupted from the trench, fake bullets shoving their way towards the tank – and then the tank rang with the sounds of impact.

“Those are real bullets,” one of the gunners gasped. “They’re firing real bullets at us!”

“What did you fucking expect?” Martin demanded, swinging the tank around. “Let them have it!”

The machine guns fired as one, sweeping along the trench. The guns, triggered by long-distance commands, were swept out of the way at once, even as the tank crunched its way through the barbed wire, refusing to be deterred by the cardboard Spanish soldiers who were mock-firing at them before being wiped out by the tank.

“That trench is going to be a problem,” he observed. The Spanish – and their French masters – had dug several deep trenches, but they weren’t wide enough. He smiled, pushed the engine to full power, and drove over the trench. His crew yelped in shock, but the trench wasn’t wide enough to cause serious problems.

“We would have been fine,” he said. The tracks had been designed to help the tank ‘climb’ out of a trench, but that was a tricky manoeuvre, one that didn’t need enemy experience. “Hard a-port!”

He swung the tank to the left, avoiding a bunker and allowing the machine guns to

spray bullets inside the concrete bunker. There were no screams, of course, but the guns inside the bunker stopped firing. He smiled again...and then the first shells started landing around them.

“This is a fucking drill,” he snapped, hoping desperately that the gunners were shooting to miss. “Forward!”

The tank slid forward, closing in on the guns. The gunners didn’t fire; the ‘enemy’ soldiers were holding up their hands and surrendering. Martin fought the temptation to turn his guns on them anyway; they had endangered his life and the lives of his people.

“I think they were trying to scare us,” the mechanic said. “We couldn’t have taken one of those shells and survived.”

“No shit,” Martin snapped. “Radio; is that the end of the fucking test?”

The radioman repeated the question, a little more tactfully, into his radio. “Yes, sir,” he said. “That’s the end of the test. We won, by the way.”

Martin snorted. “I think that if a shell had hit us...we’d be dead by now. The French and their Spanish allies won’t be shooting to miss, you know.”

Sir Benjamin smiled grimly as the tank crunched its way through all opposition, a smile that vanished when the first shells started to explode. He felt his mouth fall open, frozen into an agonised expression, until the tank completed its mission.

“That was unnecessary,” he said angrily. “The men could have been killed.”

“It’s the only way they’ll learn,” Crenshaw said.

Sir Benjamin glared at him. “They could have been *killed*,” he repeated. “How could they learn anything like that?”

Crenshaw smiled wryly. “They might have learned that their tanks were not invincible,” he said. “Look, I understand your point, but we are at war.”

“I know that,” Sir Benjamin snapped. “There’s no need to be as dangerous to the men as the enemy are, you know.”

“I know no such thing,” Crenshaw said, suddenly serious. “All I know is that the Royal Marines, which means me, got the task of evaluating the tanks in combat. If I fail, the Army or the Militia will tear the Marines a new one, as you people say, and dismiss whatever I tell them because – at the end – I’m just a dumb Marine. Neither fish nor fowl or good red hen.”

He smiled. “If I succeed, of course, they will take the weapons and tanks, and claim that it was all their idea in the first place,” he said. “All Marine involvement will be denied; I will be wiped from the history books, just like your family.”

Sir Benjamin winced. In his timeline, his family had had two American girls and one American man marry into the family; in the new timeline - that had never happened. His family might exist, in some form, but there was hardly a direct copy of himself in the world.

“It won’t be that bad,” he said, deciding not to start a fight. “So, what *are* your conclusions?”

Crenshaw smiled wryly. “I think that we need a few thousand tanks,” he said. “You know, there’s something to be said for going for Alaska.”

“The Russians have been moving troops into Alaska,” Sir Benjamin said. They’d been forced to adapt to new strategic realities, including far better Russian logistics than had ever existed in the original timeline. “They might be planning another attack.”

“It’s possible,” Crenshaw said. “Alaska, however, most of the people who live there hate the Russians.”

“Then why aren’t we sending them weapons?” Sir Benjamin demanded. “It looks like a cheap way to win a victory.”

“It’s been tried,” Crenshaw said. “The Russians slaughtered several thousand Alaskans and the rest got the message. That said, with your tanks...”

Sir Benjamin smiled. The thought of thousands of tanks crashing through the lines was appealing. “There are terrain problems, though,” he said. “The only easy place did get taken, right back at the beginning of the war.”

“I remember,” Crenshaw said. “Now, what about the other weapons?”

Sir Benjamin waved a hand at a person standing on the railway car. “Oliver, bring the weapon,” he shouted.

Crenshaw blinked. “What’s that?” He asked, as Oliver came back out of the car, carrying a long tube. “Sir Benjamin?”

“That’s a bazooka,” Sir Benjamin said. He chuckled. “They’re a pain in the neck to produce, but once we get the hang of it we can start deploying them in large numbers. They’re a counter to the tanks.”

Crenshaw looked dubious. “What’s the point?” He asked. “If shellfire can take them out...?”

“Tanks can move faster than artillery can be retargeted,” Sir Benjamin said. “These bazookas can turn a force of tanks into flaming ruin in moments. Once the French start deploying tanks...”

“And what happens when the French start deploying bazookas?” Crenshaw asked. “Or the Russians?”

Sir Benjamin didn’t answer.

The howl of a jet engine echoed overhead as Maggie O’Brien watched from the main building. Holding her notebook to her chest, she watched as the tank returned to its railway car, much to the disappointment of the soldiers who had been watching the tank go through its paces. According to Crenshaw, the number of applicants for the Royal Tank Corps had skyrocketed – from only a handful to almost every soldier in the regiment.

‘The first test of a new weapon proved to be advantageous to our brave fighting forces,’ she wrote. It was neither clear nor conclusive, but the censors would love it. Any reference to armoured vehicles would get it suppressed...and perhaps get her thrown bodily out of the American compound. ‘Unnamed military officers claim high confidence...’

“No, that won’t work,” she said, wishing that she could give a full description of a tank. At Anderson’s suggestion, she was keeping notes, ones that would allow her a chance to write a full book...once the war had ended. “We’ve been claiming high confidence for years.”

She shook her head. On one hand, showing off the tank to the soldiers was unwise; the enemy would almost certainly find out soon. If not from the soldiers themselves, from the prostitutes in the nearby camp, many of which were Latino women with families on the other side of the border. The mere presence of the jet, flying overhead to ward off any prowling French reconnaissance aircraft, would alert them that something unusual was going on.

On the other hand, morale was low and had been low ever since the first slaughters of the war, when it had become painfully clear that victory would not come easily. Showing off the new weapon would do more to raise morale than any number of entertainments – or sermons by temperance ladies, whom the soldiers hated.

She smiled. The well-bred ladies who inveigled against prostitutes and liquor were disliked, simply because they came into the trenches – although not too close to the enemy – and railed against drink and women. The Mayor of New Orleans had nearly lost the re-election campaign after instituting anti-prostitute laws – which he'd had to repeal in a hurry. The women had complained about the soldiers – it hadn't occurred to them that a lot of the protesting votes had been cast – must have been cast – by male and female inhabitants, including most of the prostitutes themselves.

“They should have gone on strike,” she said, and chuckled. She found it hard to imagine any strike that would have had the same degree of effect. A mischievous member of the city council had proposed a bill banning the temperance league from New Orleans, although it hadn't passed.

“Now that was surprising,” she said, spying Colonel Sir Benjamin Phillips heading up towards her. She smiled at the Alternative Briton, who was just as alien as the other Alternative Americans. “Good afternoon, Sir Benjamin,” she called, with a curtsy. “What can I do for you?”

Sir Benjamin smiled at her. “Not much,” he said. “What are you going to say about this event?”

Maggie passed over her notebook. “Not much,” she said. “I can't slip too much past the censors, you know.”

Sir Benjamin nodded. “Now that's *something* I would have given my right eye-teeth for in Iraq,” he said. “The Shias revolted, the Shias did not revolt, the Shias hate us, and the Shias love us...”

Maggie blinked. “I beg your pardon?” She asked. “What does that have to do with the price of tea in India?”

“It’s the price of tea in China where I come from,” Sir Benjamin said. Maggie shrugged; she’d read some of the histories that had been published in the second month following the Arrival, or more accurately republished. She couldn’t help, but think that her world had gotten off lightly. “I wonder how many other surprises there are.”

Maggie felt her heart go out to him. Every time Sir Benjamin went to London, or New York, or even New Orleans itself, he faced a world that was at the same time familiar, but chillingly different. London itself, a city that was pretty much the same at the core – barring the modern technology – would be more alien to him than an alien world.

“Surprises never really end,” she said. “Would you like to say a few words?”

Sir Benjamin smiled. “I’m really grateful for this prize, which I never deserved,” he said. “Now I’m going back to caterwaul again.” Maggie blinked at him. “Never mind,” Sir Benjamin said. “Have the two of you set a date yet?”

Maggie blushed; Sir Benjamin laughed at her. “We haven’t gotten that far yet,” she said, unwilling to admit to the feelings that had awakened within her breast. “He’s been busy drilling his ships in the new tactics, now that we have improved shells.”

Sir Benjamin nodded. “With the French around, we can’t afford to play games,” he said. “Your French, I dare say, are better than our French.”

Maggie blinked. “How so?”

Sir Benjamin snorted. “No one likes a sore loser,” he said. He corrected himself. “The French lost three wars, pretty much, in quick succession, although technically speaking they won one of them.” He smiled at her puzzlement. “Don’t ask,” he said. “Anyway, they hate the fact that they were saved by the Anglos – us and the Americans – and therefore act with spite towards us.”

He paused. “Your French might be more mature,” he said. “They haven’t sunk any liners yet, have they?”

Maggie shook her head. Relations outside the war zones were almost civil; there had been several prisoner exchanges in the last month, although under the main rules of war. No one really believed that the war could be won outright...except the tanks she'd seen today might change that. She was almost scared; was victory worth destroying the French Empire?

"No, they haven't," Sir Benjamin said, taking her agreement for granted. "They know the rules and they stick to them, even when it costs them. *Our* French will change the rules if it looks like they're losing."

Maggie looked up as a thought struck her. She turned to face him. "Does that mean that the crew of the...*Charles de Gaulle* might try to change the rules?" She asked. "If the Emperor doesn't please them, they'll overthrow him?"

Sir Benjamin looked disturbed. "It's a possibility," he said. "Despite their whining, they've been more willing than us to overthrow governments they don't like." He paused. "It's hard to see how, though."

He left, wandering back towards the railway car. Maggie watched him go, considering the matter. It was something, she thought, that should be mentioned to higher authority.

She shook her head. What had been loosed upon the world?

Chapter Twenty-Three: What is in the Air?

Bourbon Palace

Paris, France (TimeLine B)

The Emperor of France, Spain, assorted German states, Scandinavia, North Africa, New Spain, French Indochina and various bits too tiny to mention – and were mainly under British occupation at the present – was, in the opinion of Doctor Mimi Rouge, a dear. He wasn't rude or condescending to her; he allowed her to examine him without a fuss.

“So, what's wrong with me?” He asked, as he dressed himself after her examination. “Why am I so tired all of the time?”

“Stress,” Mimi told him flatly. He'd been reluctant to talk to her at first – the Hippocratic Oath might as well have been called the Hypocrite Oath at Court – but he'd warmed up to her after a while. It helped that she was not only more competent and knowledgeable than the famed Jew doctors, but she lacked any connection to the various factions in Court.

“Stress,” the Emperor said. His voice was warmly amused. “Stress. Is that why I can't have more children?”

Mimi considered the question for a moment. The causes of male infertility were hard to explain, although stress sometimes did play a role. “How often do you do it?” She asked bluntly. “Perhaps you're just not doing it enough.”

The Emperor laughed. “I try, even at my advanced age,” he said. Mimi considered using Viagra, and then wondered if there was any on the carrier. The French Court was teeming with items designed to...assist male potency, most of them completely useless. The only item that might have helped was not rhino horn or Indian erotic exercises, but the rhythm method.

“Perhaps you need a holiday,” she said, and knew that it was an impossibility. An Admiral or a Captain could hand his duties over to another; she knew that the only person whom the Emperor could hand power to was a young man who was unfit to command a tugboat, let alone the ship of state.

“I think that that might prove difficult,” the Emperor said. “So much is happening

at the moment, Doctor, and I have to remain in control.”

Mimi nodded. The *Charles de Gaulle* carried three doctors, two of which had been attached to the Court, just to help get medical information flowing through the system. Most of them got requests for contraceptives, never mind actual medical help, and they tried to involve the doctors in their factions. The Emperor ran the place through authority, sheer force of personality and playing one side off against another. Except...

She shook her head. Politics wasn't her subject, but it was clear that the entire structure of French society, particularly at the Court, was being shook up. Those who had allied themselves with Court Phillippe Lavich, the ones who were willing to gamble on the advanced 'future' knowledge, were the new powers at Court – and it was reflected in their growing confidence. Elementary politics, the Court brand, suggested that a quiet bloodbath was waiting in the future, which meant...

Trouble, she thought.

“The rules are changing,” she said. “Everything is no longer what it was.”

“That was the fault of your people,” the Emperor said, without anger. “You’ve turned the world upside down.”

Mimi shook her head slowly, feeling every one of her years. “It would have happened anyway,” she said. “As long as this war goes on, you would have happened upon the land ironclads anyway.”

“Land ironclads,” the Emperor said. “It sounds so much nicer than tanks, eh?” Mimi smiled. “I know,” he said. “Armoured cars would have led to that, would it not?”

“I think so,” Mimi said. “I’m not a history expert.”

The Emperor nodded. “Perhaps I can put more on faithful Vincent, but there’s so much that requires my personal attention.”

Prime Minister Vincent Pelletier nodded as the sentry, armed with a modern weapon from the *Charles de Gaulle*, waved the two guards to search him. He lifted his hands and allowed the guards to search him, and then stepped into the

private chambers. The Emperor looked up and smiled tiredly at Pelletier.

“Stress, apparently,” the Emperor said, holding up a hand to forestall comment. “What news on the production program?”

“I think we’ll have the land ironclads ready in time,” Pelletier said. “Sire...”

“Don’t worry about me,” the Emperor said. “What about the problems you mentioned over the telephone.”

Pelletier scowled. Improving the telephone network had been easy, a requirement according to Videzun, simply because of the *Washington’s* computers, which could break any code they could make with ease. They’d used information from the *Charles de Gaulle* to improve the network, but Pelletier had his suspicions.

“The...newcomers arrived in March, early March,” he said. “It’s August now, Sire, and I do not believe that we can maintain the...rate of advance of the *Wehrmacht*.” He scowled; there was something *so* funny about Germany being a major power. None of the Princes could agree on anything, ever since Frederick the Great had been torn down and hung.

“Would we have to?” The Emperor asked. “If we can break through the Russian lines...”

“It’s still a very long way to Moscow,” Pelletier said. “Sire...”

“But the Tsar would be sure to sue for peace,” the Emperor said. “Facing complete defeat...”

“He’s mad,” Pelletier reminded him. “If we launch the campaign now, they might bog down in the cold.”

“Like that Hitler idiot did in the alternate timeline,” the Emperor said. “I read the books, even the ones that Court Videzun decided to hide from me.”

“You’re determined to go ahead with his wedding,” Pelletier said. “Sire, it’s not wise.”

“We have to bind him to the nobility, like we do with commoners,” the Emperor said. He smiled suddenly. “You’ve changed the subject; why do you think that we cannot match or exceed Hitler’s rate of advance?”

“We don’t move as fast as his people did,” Pelletier said. Learning about Adolf Hitler had been one hell of a shock. “We can make certain preparations, perhaps even improve the land ironclads that the alternates designed, but we can’t duplicate the so-called T-34 yet.”

He snorted. The Russians were anything, but imaginative. “We might meet the fate of...ah, Emperor Napoleon.”

The Emperor chuckled. Everyone tiptoed around *that* subject when they were near him. “Yes, that might be a problem,” he acknowledged. “That said, we have a fleet of lorries that will help us to move faster.”

Pelletier shook his head. He knew, just as well as anyone, how the army needed time to learn to use the new weapons. The Generals had to translate the *ideas*; the red lines on the map, into actual war fighting tactics...and then use them to defeat the Russians. Even with total preparation, it was hard to see them reaching Moscow before the snow put the war to a halt.

“There’s always the other idea,” he said. “Do you think that we can pull it off?”

The Emperor paused. Pelletier knew that he was instinctively opposed to the idea, just on general principles – it was too dangerous if it failed, and even success might be disastrous. Still, the French Empire could endure the losses involved... even though it meant revealing the existence of the *Charles de Gaulle*.

“I don’t know,” the Emperor admitted finally. “If we could get the British off our backs, we might be able to really take the war to the Russians, but if we lose...”

Pelletier nodded. “Then it is your Royal Command that Operation Sealion is not to proceed?”

The Emperor nodded. “It’s too dangerous,” he said. “We will proceed with the original plan – attack Russia in a month and make limited gains in the remaining months before winter.”

Pelletier bowed. “Yes, Your Majesty,” he said. “It shall be done as you command.”

The *Charles de Gaulle* had carried thousands of little bits of technology that were

literally unimaginable to the people of the alternate world; transistors had been beyond them until the idea had been suggested to them. An electronic surveillance device, literally the size of a tiny dot on the wall, was undetectable to those charged with defending the Emperor.

“It shall be done as you command,” echoed through the private room. Jacqueline Petal nodded to herself; bugging an Emperor was something new for her, along with building an intelligence network right in the heart of France.

“Admiral,” she said, as the computer automatically transcribed the entire conversation. “I think that there are happy days in your future.”

“Shut up,” Videzun growled, reading the transcription. “How...interesting.”

Jacqueline gave him a droll look. “I trust that you are not actually going to marry the child,” she said. “Is she not too young for you?”

“It’s a political marriage,” Videzun said. He finished the transcription and sighed. “So, no Sealion.”

“It looks that way, yes,” Jacqueline agreed. “We could seek support from other factions in the Court, but that would reveal the secret...”

Videzun nodded. With the French Court the way it was, someone would betray the plan to the British, just to ensure that they came out on top in the resulting confusion. In the months since Jacqueline had set up the intelligence operation, they’d discovered seventeen spies, thirty-seven conspiracies, two plots to assassinate the Crown Prince and more plots aimed at Videzun than anyone had expected.

Videzun smiled. There was a certain benefit to it, he supposed; the Darwinian method would winnow out the weak and timid, but at the same time force everyone to keep their eyes on their own backs...and on their opponents’ backs.

“I think that we have to make a choice,” Picard said. The former political commissioner had fitted right in at Court. “We can...take this opportunity to defeat the British once and for all...”

“Which means deciding to do without the Emperor,” Videzun said. “If we put the Crown Prince in his place...”

Jacqueline snorted. “The young bastard is easily led,” she said. “You know what he kept asking Mimi - Doctor Mimi Rouge - for? Contraceptives!”

Videzun laughed, rather cruelly. “He doesn’t get much fun,” he said. “You know what a lot of the people here are like.”

“I have had the distant pleasure of watching him at work,” Jacqueline said. “Pity any woman who falls into his hands, that’s all I can say. He’s an abusive son of a bitch.”

Picard smiled. “And dependent upon us, or he would be if he were Emperor,” he said. “Far too many factions hate him, and with good reason.”

Videzun nodded slowly. “The other option is simple,” he said. “We have the tanks – or the land ironclads as they insist upon calling them here – and we have the men. We allow the Emperor to order an attack on the Russian positions, perhaps marching as far as Moscow before the snow falls.”

“Either way, we’re looking at turning the heat up a *lot*,” Picard said. “I understand their concerns; war here is almost gentlemanly. If we present a *serious* threat to one of the big empires, they might sign a quick peace with the other and turn on us.”

Jacqueline nodded. “Can we guarantee a victory for us?” She asked. “What about the atomic pile?”

“Two years, assuming that everything goes right,” Videzun said. “These people had very little understanding of atomics before we arrived, you know.”

Jacqueline smiled. “Yes, I know,” she said. “It’s important, of course, to keep that out of the hands of the Empire as a whole – and particularly out of the Crown Prince’s hands.”

Videzun shook his head. “There is a point that has been missed,” he said. “The *George Washington* is here, now.” Picard nodded grimly. “If we can do as much as we have, one assumes that they can do the same.” He waited for them to nod. “In a year, they might be able to have atomics themselves, which would make life...interesting.”

“Interesting,” Picard said. “You think that we have to strike now?”

“Oh, yes,” Videzun said. “We can, with some of our technology, coordinate a strike against the Royal Navy in the Orkneys, then land on Britain and march to London.”

Jacqueline scowled. “If the *George Washington* became involved, the losses could be rather heavy.”

Videzun nodded. “That said; we do have some anti-ship missiles.”

Picard snorted. “Can we take out an entire American aircraft carrier with the handful of missiles we have?”

Videzun smiled. “I have no idea,” he said. “It should be fun finding out, don’t you think?”

“It would be a great deal safer, at least in my head, if the *George Washington* was elsewhere,” Picard said. “It’s an unknown factor – do they know about us?”

“It’s impossible to be certain,” Jacqueline said. “There is a second problem.” She waited for the two men to look at her. “We know very little about the land defences in Britain itself. Now that the *George Washington* is operating an AWACS near the islands, we can’t use one of our fighters to probe the defences. In fact...if we want Sealion to succeed, we’ll have to use our fighters to take down the AWACS.”

“Which would mean revealing our existence,” Picard said.

Videzun shrugged. He would have been delighted if the Americans remained ignorant of the *Charles de Gaulle*, but common sense warned that the Americans – who were not as stupid as French propaganda claimed – would have had ample signs of the existence of the *Charles de Gaulle*, simply through monitoring the new aircraft going through their preparations.

“We have to stop them from using Britain as a base,” he said. “I think it’s time to talk to Belen, don’t you think?”

For the nobles in Paris and France, used to having the best of the best, there was a certain...temptation in simplicity, in having genuine elegance as opposed to filling ones rooms with as much gaudy items as one could. For the private rooms

of Court Phillipe Lavich, newly appointed controller – with General Leblanc – of the project to develop a new force using the alternate technology, nothing was too small.

Lavich smiled as he considered the room. It wasn't over-decorated, searching for a balance between ultra-ornate decorations and practicality. Like the best parlours, belonging to those on the social circuit, Lavich's private rooms were an expression of the personality of their owner. He could care less about the people – he didn't care about impressing many people with his taste, charm, sophistication...and outright greed – but he wanted to impress his visitor. It was her first visit to his private rooms, after all.

He smiled. Normal French practice, when Ladies of the Court were involved, was to have a chaperone, perhaps a mother or a sister, protecting the virtue of the woman in question. Maids and other lowborn people didn't need chaperones; it was assumed that they had no virtue of their own. With his guest tonight, it had been made clear that her being chaperoned would be seen as insulting.

The doorbell rang and he almost moved to answer it himself, but he calmed himself; that was the task of the butler. His grave old family servant answered the door; he heard a calm female voice speaking to him. The sound of the voice made his heart quicken inside his breast.

"The Lady Belen Lefunte," the butler said. Lavich looked up and felt his mouth fall open; in white trousers and a white shirt, hidden under a white cloak, Belen was astonishingly beautiful. Her long brown hair, almost untamed by comb or expensive styling, hung down her back; she smiled at him and he thought that he was in heaven.

"Thank you for coming," he said, trying to remain calm. "Did you have a good trip?" His voice stumbled. "Ah, please sit down."

Belen smiled at him, understanding his problem. "Yes, I had a nice trip in the carriage," she said. "Thank you for sending it."

"Everyone will know how lucky I am to be eating dinner with you," Lavich said. "They'll be burning with envy."

Belen laughed. "Let them burn," she said. "I've not seen you for a week. How's the project coming along?"

“Well enough,” Lavich said. “We have the first designs of land ironclads on the way now, and we understand the production methods enough to start spreading out the factories. Give us a couple of months and we’ll have thousands of the land ironclads.”

“A good thing too,” Belen said. “Of course, you have to keep innovating.”

Lavich lifted an eyebrow. “Why?” He asked, just to hear her talk. “Why do we have to keep innovating when we have you?”

Belen’s face twitched. “You’ll run out of our ideas sooner or later,” she said. “You have to keep forcing everything forward, from rockets to tanks to submarines, just to stay ahead. Once Russia is beaten, the *George Washington* will still exist.”

Lavich frowned as the maid brought in the first dish, setting the tureen of soup down at his table. Lavich offered Belen his hand, guiding her over to the table. “You cannot simply sink the enemy ship?” He asked. “It’s still at New Orleans.”

“Not and wipe out the knowledge it carries,” Belen said. “You have to force forward development, my love.”

Hearing her admit that she had feelings for him made his heart nearly burst with delight. “If we can beat the Russians,” he said, feeling as if he could do it himself naked, “then the British will sue for peace.”

“They’re developing land ironclads – tanks – too,” Belen said grimly. They drank their soup in silence. “They will not stand still either...”

“Of course,” Lavich said. “The Russians, at least, don’t have any helpers...”

“How do you know?” Belen asked. “If one ship reached here and another reached the British Empire...then why not one in Russia as well?”

Lavich said nothing as they ate the main course. “I see your point,” he said finally. “They have to be beaten quickly.”

Belen nodded. “The side that makes the most use of the new technology will be the dominant power for the next hundred years,” she said. “In our timeline, we never dared try for space on our own, but you could.”

“I read some of your novels,” Lavich said. “Do you think that we can build spaceships?”

“Given enough time, yes,” Belen said. “Remember, you must innovate and keep innovating before time runs out.”

“Thank you, Marie,” Lavich said, as the maid cleared the table. He escorted Belen to a sofa and sat down next to her, much to her amusement. “Do you know what the Russians do to women?”

Belen smiled. It was enchanting. “I was rather hoping that you were going to show me what you do to women,” she murmured, pulling him towards her for a kiss. Lavich sighed as the kiss ended, his passion flowering deep within him. It was a struggle to undress her, or him, without tearing their clothes. Her body was as good as he had expected, her passion as much in evidence as his own.

“I love you,” he breathed, seeing her for the first time completely naked. “I **love you...**”

Chapter Twenty-Four: Suffragettes and Reporters for Jackson!

Springfield USA

Nr New Orleans, North American Union (TimeLine B)

Sharon Green didn't know who had called the small town that had sprung up near New Orleans Springfield. Admiral Jackson hadn't been happy at the name, but it had caught on with everyone in the small town – and the members of the *Washington's* crew who had stayed ashore. The entire place was a legal nightmare; whose writ *really* ran in Springfield?

She shook her head as she walked down the road, heading to the meeting room. The entire town had been built around the factories that had been devoted to building technology and medical items from the original timeline, as well as printing and distributing information about the original timeline. She knew that Sally Woods, assisted by Professor Colin Barrington-Smythe, had been working on producing a guide to the original timeline, one that avoided the politically charged issues.

She smiled; she had warned Sally that it wouldn't work – and it hadn't. Historians across the North American Union – who rated Washington as the idiot who lost the Revolution – had been delighted with the information, using it to produce thousands of new theories as to why the Revolution had been lost in their timeline. The original conclusion, that Washington had been to blame, had been shown to be...slightly misplaced.

“Morning, Miss Green,” a policeman said. The blue-clad officer had been imported from New Orleans, a man who had the clear authority of the North American Union. Springfield was already becoming crowded; thousands of people were coming, just to see some of the advanced technology – and to work on it. She knew that Admiral Jackson had been annoyed about it – but now that labourers were needed, he had reluctantly agreed to allow her to try to recruit some people.

Special people.

“Morning,” she said, noting that the officer was unarmed. She'd been informed

that the only places in the United Empire where policemen were armed regularly were Quebec and Ireland, where there were ongoing semi-insurgencies; ‘semi’ because of the Empire’s willingness to crush overt opposition.

“The trash were demonstrating today,” the policeman said, waving towards one of the only two buildings in Springfield that flew an American flag. The American Independence Party, having learned of the future, had seen the crew of the *Washington* as six thousand voters on a plate, despite Jackson’s orders for the crew to stay out of politics.

“I see,” she said. It would be years before there was a television station outside Springfield, let alone the Internet, but it would not take *that* many years – once the war was over. She’d gone back to producing a newsletter almost on her own...and had discovered that it was published across the North American Union – and beyond. “What did they want this time?”

The policeman shrugged, but then, little was necessary. She’d interviewed the leader of the American Independence Party (Springfield) and hadn’t been impressed; ‘trash’ was a mild name for people who gave white trash a bad name. They looked at the sheer power of the United States of America – super-ships like the *Washington*, hints of atomic weapons and space travel – and never saw the darker side.

She smiled suddenly. She expected that the American Independence Party would lose even more votes once the popular impression of the United States, like something out of *Blade Runner*, penetrated the entire North American Union. Shootings, drugs, endless immigration from Mexico, constant confrontations between the two political parties...

“I read your essay in the last paper,” the policeman said, as a car drove past. Cars were rarer in the North American Union than she’d expected, a result of the well-developed railway system than any lack of the capability to produce them. “It was very interesting and quite well argued.”

“Thank you,” Sharon said, trying to remember exactly what she’d written. “Was that the one on the need for free contraception?”

“Indeed,” the policeman said. Sharon smiled; the tendency to break into political debates at any moment wasn’t native to either the original Britain or America. “I confess, however, won’t it lead to more...premarital affairs than we are...comfortable with?”

Sharon paused to consider. The policeman didn't sound to be intolerant, but the essay had caused one hell of a debate in the letter columns. "The affairs exist anyway," she said, and the policeman nodded. "This way...they won't have any...consequences that will force people into a marriage neither of them will enjoy."

"Perhaps," the policeman said. This world might be more peaceful, but it had its downside; most women believed that their husband was the master of the house – or their father, if they were unmarried. He held up a hand. "Slow down, sir," he called.

Sharon smiled and made her escape. One thing that Springfield had quickly developed, just like its namesake, was a culture where everyone knew everyone. The inflow of newcomers, generally speaking, were well-behaved, but not all of them were used to the laws emplaced by the Mayor – Admiral Jackson wearing one of his hats. Smoking and speeding were only two examples; restrictions on whorehouses were a third example.

She passed the small church, one designed for the Protestant crew, and waved at the worshippers. Keeping the Sabbath was important here; Sundays were always days of rest. Even soldiers had a break on the Sabbath, unless they were on the front, and even the French honoured the Sabbath. Both sides tended to have informal truces during those days.

Sharon sniggered. During the war on terror, protesters had protested against fighting on holy days – although only the enemies holy days. In this weird world, the truces were honoured by both sides...although warfare was...more civilised here. Truces were honoured, both sides took care of prisoners...it was almost paradise compared to the brutal fighting of the war on terror.

She reached her destination, a long flat building that had been purchased by an organisation that was officially frowned upon, especially during wartime. It was unmarked; not even a plaque, but she knew where she was. It had been established at her request, after all. She stepped up to the door and rang the bell.

The door was opened by a middle-aged woman with long red tresses of hair and a generous blossom, despite wearing a dress designed to downplay her assets. Her dress was simple and gloomy, designed to divert attention from her, but her handshake was firm.

“Sharon,” she said, her voice flat. She couldn’t speak properly; she couldn’t shout in anger or whisper. Sharon wasn’t sure why, but she suspected throat damage. “I’m Elspeth Grange.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Sharon said, keeping her voice warm. “I assume that you had no trouble when you came here?”

“None at all,” Elspeth said. “The nine of us came, as you requested, and we are here to hear your words.”

She stepped aside, allowing Sharon to enter. The small building had been erected quickly, with little thought to decoration, a deliberate attempt to emulate a male-only building. The suffragettes wanted male privileges; some of them were jailed for their more spectacular attempts to promote their cause.

Sharon smiled. All they really needed were some ideas on how to proceed...and some funding. She was happy to supply both.”

“Sharon Green, please meet Constance, Abigail, Rose, Syeda, Marion, Heather, Katrina and Dawn,” Elspeth said. “Between us, we are the leaders of the American Suffragette movement.”

Sharon took her time to study them. Two of them were black; Marion and Katrina. Syeda seemed to be East Indian. Dawn, apparently, was a Red Indian; the term ‘Native American’ had never caught on in this timeline.

“The People” – she spoke it as if it were a name – “are really harsh on their women,” Elspeth said, answering the unspoken question. Dawn smiled sadly; Sharon could make out the signs of beatings in the distant past on her face. “Some of them resent their position, and take it out on their womenfolk.”

“I see,” Sharon said. She’d researched the status of black and Indian women, but she’d heard very little about the Native Americans. “Why?”

Elspeth shrugged. “The conquest simply overran most of them,” she said. “Some of them became...*red apples*, which is a term for an Indian who adopts white ways because he is red on the outside and white on the inside, others died trying to hold back the inevitable. Those who survived formed the People; one vast tribe of the survivors, and live on a reservation near California. They hate any contact with us...and we’ve been beaten for going there.”

Sharon shrugged. “And Indian women?” She asked, meaning Indians from India. “What about them?”

Syeda spoke with a perfect American accent, the strange cross between the American accent she knew and a British accent. “We are considered second-class citizens here and in India,” she said. “Our fathers dislike us having the freedoms of men; they resent us and arrange our weddings for us.”

“The Indian Parliament was never happy about having to educate the Indian women,” Elspeth said. Sharon listened; this was something that had not appeared in the books she’d studied. “An educated woman, the men claimed, was an expensive woman, but the Raj had its way. Even with an education, the women have few opportunities.” Elspeth sighed. “Who would hire a woman who might have to leave with a pregnancy at any time?”

Sharon allowed herself a moment to consider. “One thing you can have, now, is the opportunity to control your own bodies,” she said. “We have contraceptive pills, contraceptive implants and even condoms.”

Constance laughed. “Men don’t bother to buy condoms and women are rarely allowed to buy them unescorted,” she said. “It’s a rare man who will forsake the pleasure of unprotected sex just to avoid...inconveniencing his wife.”

Sharon reconsidered rapidly. She’d allowed herself to forget that the inhabitants of Timeline B were hardly stupid, just less advanced than them. “Then that’s a good cause for the first major protests,” she said. “Women have the vote here, don’t they?”

“Of course,” Elspeth said. “This isn’t France, or Russia, you know.”

Sharon had heard enough about Russia to want to avoid hearing more. Women were chattel there, along with a goodly percentage of the menfolk. “Then you have to vote tactically,” she said. “Voting is secret, right?” They nodded. “The trick is to form a union of women; one that will deliver a body of votes to whichever politician – hell, can women stand for election?”

“Yes, but who would vote for a woman?” Elspeth asked bitterly. Sharon saw years of struggle in her slight frame. “Whatever rights we have by law...”

“Every woman?” Sharon asked dryly. “Hell, with some work you could appeal to the men as well.”

Elspeth waved a hand at her dress. “Or perhaps not,” she said. “You do have ways of getting information out, don’t you?”

Sharon nodded, then hesitated. “The newsletter is the only thing I have at the moment,” she admitted. “In a few years, we’ll have a basic Internet, but that will take time. Even building one of the first computers is a delicate task.”

Elspeth didn’t look downhearted. “Then you can use your newsletter as one source of information,” she said. “We have women who will stand...if they can pay the thousand pounds that has to be put into the electoral system.”

Sharon scowled. The system made a certain kind of sense; very few people earned less than several thousand pounds in a year – and living costs were lower than in the United States. If a person put up one thousand pounds – and the catch was that it had to be earned by them personally, rather than inherited or given to them as a gift – it proved that they were sincere. If someone earned money, they were considered reliable by *someone*.

She could stand; hardly any of the suffragettes could, unless...

“There is a possibility for getting them the money,” she said, and smiled. “As you may have read, there is going to be a major expansion of Springfield, covering areas such as advanced electronics and information management, as well as areas I’m not allowed to talk about at the moment. They are, in fact, interested in recruiting people to work in the factories, such as yourselves.”

Elspeth’s mouth dropped open. “They would be interested in taking unmarried women?” She asked. Sharon, who suspected that ‘unmarried’ meant ‘divorced,’ said nothing. The divorce laws were weighted on the side of the men anyway. “Can women do the work?”

Sharon nodded. Admiral Jackson had assured her that it was possible. “The work is delicate,” she said. “Men would be...too brutal, too inclined to move quickly. Have you ever seen a man try to sew?”

The chuckles that greeted that comment proved that she had guessed right. She’d known a few men who could actually do little repairs on their own – and remembered the joke about ‘what every lonely man needs’ – but in this universe she suspected that sewing would be considered woman’s work.

“Yes, unmarried women are welcome,” she said. “For the moment, there will be

barracks for people until they move into a flat, seeing that the flats are being built at the moment. When you work for one of us, you will be considered equal to the men. That included, by the way, little sympathy for the monthly monster.” She smiled at their expressions. “There *will* be opportunity to move upwards, although we’re not sure where to yet, but it will allow you to build up money.”

Elspeth smiled. “I think that I might be interested,” she said. “What about protection?”

“The police will provide protection,” Sharon said, honestly shocked. “You are attacked by men?”

Elspeth cast an unreadable look at Dawn. “The People’s...medicine men have been known to declare suffragettes witches,” she said. “The only cure is for them to be brutally taken by the menfolk there.”

Just because someone gets the shitty end of the stick doesn’t mean that they’re the good guys, Sharon remembered. These...*Native Americans* hadn’t ever had the benefits of casinos and guilt-trips. “Don’t they have policemen there?” She asked. “Someone who can stop them?”

“The policemen are the ones doing it, by and large,” Elspeth said bitterly. Sharon shuddered. “How do we pressure the politicians into banning that – and enforcing it?”

Sharon scowled. “Rape isn’t a banned offence?”

“Not there,” Dawn said. “The North American Union simply doesn’t care what happens to the People, or to their men, or to their women. The men just drink and drink and drink and then they beat their women.”

“Eternally helpless,” Sharon commented. “Many of them could come here, you know; the people here don’t discriminate.”

Elspeth smiled. “The People prefer to wallow in their own misery,” she said. Dawn nodded. “It’s so much easier if there is someone else to blame for your problems.”

Sharon refocused the conversation with ruthless determination. “If you can deliver the female vote,” she said, “you can vote for the MP who supports female issues. Say contraception; form a League of Women Voters.” She smiled. “America’s

third to last line of defence.”

Elspeth, she was starting to realise, was a canny politician under her appearance. “A league that advises women to vote – and who to vote for,” she said. “It might work.”

“No,” Sharon said. “You must not dictate which way they must vote, but you must encourage them to vote and often, in each of the elections. Encourage the candidates to speak at meetings, force them to decide where they stand on female issues, and act to punish them if they change their minds after being elected.”

“A non-political political organisation,” Constance murmured.

“It won’t be able to operate within the People’s reservation,” Dawn said, sadly. “I had to leave there in a hurry, and they won’t want to see me back again.”

Sharon smiled as she stood up. “Thank you for hearing me,” she said. “Will you continue to meet here?”

“Of course,” Elspeth said. “Feel free to point some other women in this direction.”

Sharon nodded as they shook hands. “Many of the women from the *Washington* will be more than willing to help out,” she said. “The last thing they want is a marriage with a guy from the dark ages.”

It was darker than she had expected when she stepped out; the meeting had gone on longer than she’d expected. Sharon stood outside and wondered where to go; she didn’t have any pressing engagements or appointments at all. On impulse, she decided to go visit the café, such as it was, and get some dinner.

“Hey, Miss Green,” a voice said, as she entered the café. George Gilbert, a former soldier before transferring to the Marines, waved cheerfully at her. “Join me for dinner?”

“Why not?” Sharon asked. Gilbert wasn’t a bad man at all; she’d interviewed him before they’d been transported to the strange new universe. “Why not indeed?”

“I can’t think of a good reason,” Gilbert said. Unlike many men from her world,

he could keep his eyes off her chest for minutes at a time. “What are you having?”

Sharon paused to consider. “Beef burger, I think,” she said. Burgers didn’t seem to have caught on in Timeline B; they’d been introduced by a former chef from the *Washington*. “You?”

“Pizza,” Gilbert said, waving to the waiter and passing on the order. “What have you been doing?”

Sharon grinned at him. “I’ve been sowing the seeds for rebellion,” she said. “You?”

Gilbert laughed. “Training and training and training,” he said. “You know; these people really are a bunch of pussies.”

Sharon smelt a story. “No,” she said. “Carry on.”

She gave him her best wide-eyed innocent look. It didn’t fool him, judging from the snort he let out. “They don’t have any fighting skills like we do,” he said. “They seem to have let their army fade away during the long time of peace. Their Marines are nothing like as capable as the 1st Marine Division back home; their task is limited to taking and holding beaches and ports.”

The food arrived and they spent a few moments contentedly munching. The burger was almost perfect. “I think that they have enjoyed their peace too long,” Sharon said finally, nibbling a chip. Chips too had been alien to the new world. “What about you?”

“If you want peace, prepare for war,” Gilbert said. His pizza vanished, slice by slice, into his mouth; Sharon watched with some amusement. “They didn’t start preparing fast enough.” He smiled. “Of course, the same could be said of us.”

Sharon nodded, finishing her meal. The cup of coffee wasn’t what it would have been back home, but it was drinkable. Now that she was sated, other feelings arose within her and she eyed Gilbert speculatively. If the Marine was aware of her silent examination, he showed no sign, allowing her to consider the best angle of attack.

Bingo! “What are you doing this evening?” She asked, keeping her voice casual. “I’ve been looking to visit the disco.”

Gilbert smiled at her. The new disco had been set up by a former DJ from the *Washington*, much to the delight of the younger teenagers and the horror of their parents. "I could do with some dancing," he said seriously. "What kind did you have in mind?"

Chapter Twenty-Five: Mr O'Reilly Goes to Washington

Springfield USA

Nr New Orleans, North American Union (TimeLine B)

Only a few years before he had taken command of TASK FORCE India, and ended up in the universe everyone was starting to call 'TimeLine B', Admiral Jackson had read a book about the laws of the universe suddenly changing, forcing humanity back to medieval living conditions. Looking down at the images of Cuba, a land led by a man many people suspected was dead in his home universe, Jackson suddenly had a vivid mental picture of what the world of *Dies the Fire* looked like.

Cuba had been colonised by Spain, and finally incorporated into the Bourbon Empire, but remained under the control of the local Spaniards, rather than any major French garrison. One close look at the set-up had shown Jackson why a slave revolt would be unsuccessful; the island was dotted with small castles, armed to the teeth with machine guns. The workers – slaves in all, but name – worked on the fields, under the careful watch of the guards, who were armed to the teeth and well fed.

"Bastards," Jackson commented. He looked up at Captain Morrigan. "I think we need to start plotting carefully," he said.

"I would not dare to argue with that statement," Morrigan said. He tapped a picture taken by the remote drone; ten slaves were hung from crucifixes, dying by inches. "It's like one of the Draka movies."

"I never saw those," Jackson said softly. "We're going to have to take out those castles."

Morrigan studied the display. *Castle* was perhaps too strong a word, but the fortified buildings would be able to stand off any slave rebellion, and most of the food was within their walls. By the time that French reinforcements from New Spain had arrived, the slaves would probably be in the mood to surrender – assuming that they somehow avoided being mown down in vast numbers.

"That would be easy, of course," Morrigan said. The two men shared a glance; with an unlimited amount of precision weapons, taking Cuba would have been

easy. As it was, every Harpoon or Penguin expended on Cuba was irreplaceable.

“We’ll have to use the Lancaster bombers,” Jackson said. “Now that we’ve been able to help them build a proper guidance system, and targeting system, we should be able to take the islands.”

“We really need a small Marine force,” Morrigan said. “What about attacking those ships there?”

Jackson examined the report from the recon drone, floating high over Cuba. What had been called Guantanamo Bay in their timeline was a harbour, one of the two that remained on the island, along with Havana itself. Both harbours held a handful of ships, mainly fast destroyers and cruisers, competing in the endless fight for the Caribbean.

“Fire when ready, Gridley,” Jackson commented. It was a similar situation. “If we move a superdreadnaught squadron into bombarding position...”

“Can’t we take them out with the carrier bombers?” Anderson said. The promoted Admiral was the third man in the room. “They should be able to destroy the ships.”

“It’s not always workable to take them out in a harbour, not with your technology,” Morrigan said. “Look how much anti-aircraft weapons they’ve been installing.”

Jackson scowled. The French had been busy, installing thousands of their own new weapons across their possessions, arming them to the teeth. He understood the reluctance of the Admiralty to commit to the attack – many of the weapons were untested anyway – but it had cost them dearly in time.

“So, we send in the heavy bombers, using your direction-finding system, and bomb the crap out of those barracks,” Anderson said. Like Jackson, Anderson had chafed at the long inactivity. “Then we land a small Marine force and take the place.”

“That sounds fine,” Morrigan said. “I think we can rely on the slaves for taking out the remaining Frenchmen, seeing that they hate them.”

Jackson nodded. The heavy bombers weren’t exactly ‘Lancaster’ bombers, of course; the design had been modified by enthusiastic researchers into something

that was far more capable than the original bomber – and carried more bombs too. Only the grim certainty that the French were making the same changes to their bombers dimmed his own enthusiasm.

“And that leaves only the main attack,” Anderson said. “The Militia generals are confident that they can handle it.”

“I hope they’re right,” Jackson said, concealing his worry. The Militia wasn’t the National Guard; by the time that it had become obvious that war was coming, there hadn’t been enough time to train them properly, even using the North American Army for training cadre. Overconfidence was the order of the day, even after the slaughters that had created the vast no-man’s-land region.

He paused and examined the map. New Spain’s northern regions – Mexico, in their timeline – were far more developed than they had been under the series of corrupt governments that Mexico had saddled itself with. The French had been determined to unite and exploit the country, creating thousands of railway lines and road networks. The downside, for them, was that that would allow the French to reinforce any part of the front very quickly.

He smiled suddenly. It had been the eternal problem for the British and the North American Union; as long as the base at Panama stood, actually *winning* was difficult. With the new tanks and guns, advancing through Mexico would be... easier than it had been before, but they had to be careful of victory disease. Which reminded him...

“Felix” – they’d graduated to first names – “what’s happening with the aircraft carriers?”

“We have nine so far,” Anderson said. He’d been in charge of that aspect of the project, while Jackson concentrated on Springfield and on establishing a home for his people. “They’re all converted battlecruisers.”

Morrigan scowled. “I thought that there would be thirty,” he snapped. “We need as many as we can get, you know, with thousands of the Spitfire aircraft.”

Jackson held up a hand, calming them before an argument could break out. The ‘Spitfires’ bore little resemblance to the British aircraft of the original timeline; they had more in common with Japanese Zeros, at least until the Hellcats could be built. It had been one of the more interesting debates, arguing over the merits of the Zero versus the original Spitfire, or perhaps they should have moved directly

to combat jets and...

“The Admiralty felt that converting the entire battlecruiser production of the east coast to carriers risked us running short of battlecruisers,” Anderson said. “They have seen your information, even understood it, but they’re reluctant to proceed with a complete switch-over to your technology.”

Jackson smiled. “It’s not that important,” he said. “Cuba, at least, is within the range of long-range bombers, particularly since we worked out the drop tanks” – another change to the original design – “and the radio direction-finding system. By the by, what about the new coordinating systems?”

Anderson smiled. “I can sit on the bridge of the *Amherst* and give orders to the entire fleet without problems,” he said seriously. “My shining sword in my hands; nine battlecruisers plus escorts and the troop transports.”

He tapped the map. “Give me a week and we’ll have the carriers ready for their first mission,” he said. “Even with the interference over the *Prince Charlie*...”

His voice broke off. The *Prince Charlie*, a pre-dreadnaught from before the invention of the superdreadnaughts, had been used as a test vehicle for the carrier-borne fighters; a target for their torpedoes. The first test, with inept and untrained pilots, had ‘sunk’ the ship – and the speed of each ‘sinking’ had only increased as the pilots became more experienced. The Admiralty, in the meantime, had only made the tests harder and harder, hoping to discredit the results.

“I guess they want bigger ships so that they can feel important,” Morrigan said. The United States Navy had had its fair share of political admirals; ones who’d only wanted the perks of the job. A year of war should have weeded them out; if the predicted big battle had actually happened, it might have been a disaster.

Anderson shrugged. “Sir Joseph is not that bad,” he said. “It’s the commanders of the superdreadnaught squadrons and those slated for those commands.”

Jackson scowled. The United States navy had suffered from battleship admirals before World War Two; they’d only been defeated after Pearl Harbour. If carrier commands were seen as...useless, and superdreadnaught commands seen as important, then the best people would still aim to become battleship commanders.

“We can leave those for the moment,” he said. “The main priority is to prepare proof that the concept is in fact workable...and then launch the attack on the

French. Once we knock out the base at Panama, using our own Pearl Harbour-type strike, then we can think about the future.”

Anderson nodded. “The Prime Minister was very keen on taking Alaska,” he said.

Jackson took a moment to consider. He’d always had trouble understanding the relationship between the Viceroy and the Prime Minister of the North American Union; one the elected head of government, one the selected head of state, representing the monarch.

“That...can be done by local forces,” he said. Personally, he would have preferred to have relied upon the blockade, terminating the lines of communication between Alaska and Russia. “Tanks will be less useful up there.”

Anderson smiled. “They have a new toy,” he said. “Let them play.”

“As long as they don’t repeat the little blunder of having the commander drive the tank,” Jackson said. “Coordinating everything is going to be a stone-cold bitch anyway, don’t you think?”

“No argument,” Anderson said. “I’m glad I’m in the navy.”

Jackson thought of the battalions of the New Royal Marines – ones trained by the handful of United States Marines – being prepared in Springfield itself. With a couple of years, they might have been ready for the task at hand – but they’d had only six months. The offensive, he was sure, would work – unless the French had developed a proper anti-tank gun – but it wouldn’t be as successful as it might have been in the original timeline. It was the battles in the Caribbean that would determine their success or failure – not bloody land battles, with thousands dying for a few miles.

“One final point, then,” Morrigan said. “How much of the *Washington* is going to take part in the attack?”

It sounded like a stupid question; Jackson knew that it wasn’t. “I think, now we have an active and workable fuel supply, we don’t have to be so careful with the aircraft,” he said. “Some of the F-18s are on land, some of the helicopters have been tasked to support the land offensive and stand-by to engage the French Navy, should it sortie out of Panama.”

He paused. “I think I will authorise the use of the fighters,” he said. “Don’t use

the anti-ship missiles unless the French Navy comes out to play, and for god's sake don't let them swarm you."

Morrigan nodded. It was one of the few tactics that might have been successful against the *Washington*, sending so many small planes that shooting them all down was impossible. A single lucky aircraft the size of a Lancaster, packed with bombs, crashing into the *Washington* would have blown her out of the water.

"We'll stay well back," he said. "So, a week then?"

Jackson smiled. "A week would be good," he said. "By then, we should be ready for anything."

The headquarters of the American Independence Party had a single massive stars and stripes floating outside, hanging from a flagpole in defiance of the laws against flying non-United Empire flags. It was a legal loophole; had they flown the French flag, they could have been arrested – but the Law Lords had never considered the legal implications of a flag from another universe. Like so much else, it was in line for their consideration, but with issues such as labour laws and property rights, flag flying simply wasn't important.

Commander Patrick O'Reilly, Executive Officer of the *George Washington*, studied the flag thoughtfully, saluting it absently. It wasn't one from TimeLine A, the sheer amateur sewing of the flag proved that – it would have been discarded with horror if submitted to a contest. He smiled suddenly; one of the white stars was missing – had it been left off purposefully, or was it an accident?

The headquarters itself was...dingy, a small cheap building that had been built quickly – and then allowed to rot. It smelt odd, even to his damaged nose, used to all the smells of the sea. A hint of...alcohol, and a drug he couldn't identify. There was no bell; he knocked firmly on the door.

The face that greeted him went from suspicious to delight when he saw O'Reilly's uniform. An unshaven dark-bearded face, pure-white, peered at O'Reilly, then welcomed him into the room. The headquarters was tiny, reminding O'Reilly of the fictional headquarters of anarchists rather than a serious political party.

"Oh, I've been waiting for so long for one of you to take notice, Admiral," the man burred, his voice harsh and warm at the same time, almost painful to

O'Reilly's ears. It was, he realised, an attempt to reproduce the general *Washington* accent – something he would have thought was impossible. "Have you finally decided to deal with us?"

O'Reilly felt his senses swim. Whatever he had expected, it wasn't that. "I'm a commander," he said, fixing onto the only thing he could. "The Admiral didn't come."

"Ah, too concerned about being noticed by the tyrants," the man bumbled. He stuck out one unclean hand; O'Reilly grasped it reluctantly. "Jonathon Scott, American Independence Party, Springfield."

"Pleased to meet you," O'Reilly said, and knew that he was lying. If this was the American Independence Party...

"And may I say that I'm *very* pleased to meet you," Scott said. He waved O'Reilly to a chair beside a table covered with pamphlets. "Make yourself at home; I'm just going to shave and wash."

"A very good idea," O'Reilly said. He hadn't meant to be sarcastic, but it came out. Scott didn't seem to notice; he left through a side door. O'Reilly shrugged and started to read one of the pamphlets; it seemed to be warning about the influx of popery into the North American Union through Quebec.

Fuck me, he thought, as he read on. The author, who was unnamed, believed that the British Government – which naturally rigged all of the American elections – was using Popish spies to maintain their control over all Americans, who yearned to be free and clear. It warned on, covering the dangers of Hindus – which it seemed to think were masters of depravity – and Muslims, who each had twenty wives.

"No they don't," he muttered. Mormonism had clearly never come into existence here. "What have I walked into here?"

He picked up a second pamphlet and examined it; it told of Americans fighting in the war for British gains, gains that the North American Union would never share in. Alaska, it warned through sources at the War Office, would be sold to British noblemen, who would use it for their own good and not America's. The Catholics in New Spain would be used to hack away at the religion of the Americans, while ordinary Americans would be enslaved.

“Like that one?” Scott asked, passing over a cup of *American* coffee. O’Reilly, puzzled, wondered where Scott had gotten it. “What do you think of this one?”

O’Reilly read the leaflet quickly. After a brief description of the United States of America, it discussed ways and means of getting there, including a peaceful coup against the government in Amherst, which would somehow lead to the establishment of the American Dream, including the eviction of the black and Native American populations. If not, then the Patriots would go underground – and lead resistance against the King-Emperor.

I think you’re demented, he thought. “How many of you are there in all?” He asked. The entire American Independence Party could not be only one man, right? “In Springfield, and the world.”

“Oh, millions,” Scott said. O’Reilly *looked* at him. “Around five thousand listed party members,” he corrected, a little downcast. He brightened up. “But we have dozens of supporters who keep their heads down, voting for us, but doing very little else.”

O’Reilly sighed. He had been wrong to think that there was potential here. “And how many are here?” He asked. “In Springfield itself, I mean?”

“Two hundred so far,” Scott said. “We’re all going to be coming here, you know.”

“I do trust that you are going to work,” O’Reilly said. He wasn’t sure if the North American Union had anything reassembling a welfare state, but Springfield didn’t have one. “What are you going to do here?”

“Why, plot our campaign against the tyrants,” Scott said. “We’ll build up weapons, with your support, and then launch attacks against the government and then...”

“You’ll be destroyed,” O’Reilly said flatly. This was worse than the ZOG fanatics he’d seen, from time to time, on the news. “Tell me, what do you think of the Irish Catholics?”

Scott was clearly too keen to sense the trap. “They’re scum,” he said earnestly. “All they do is protest and serve the Pope...wait, where are you going?”

“This was a waste of time,” O’Reilly said flatly. “You might be...independence activists, but that is because you were losers under the old regime. You cannot

raise the funds you need because most of you are trash. You cannot convince anyone to join you because you have a crazy platform; independence for the sake of independence is not enough.”

He was breathing heavily, his anger driving him on. “You’re a disgrace,” he snapped, and ignored Scott’s shock. “We have enough people like you in the other timeline, people who whine about how the government doesn’t take care of you. People are dying in this war, and all you do is sit and whine and entertain your prejudices. Blacks are good citizens – if they actually apply themselves, like the rest of us!”

Without saying any more, he stormed out of the room, ignoring the cold glare pounding into his back. O’Reilly headed back towards his quarters, knowing that he would have to find other allies to help Ireland – if they even existed in the other timeline.

Chapter Twenty-Six: Strike South

Royal Palace

Isabella City, New Spain (TimeLine B)

The Royal Palace had been built for the Spanish Emperor, before the role merged into the French Emperor – which was another way of saying that the French took over – during the period when the resurgent British America had begun to expand again into the west, heading towards New Orleans. As a symbol of Spanish determination to hold the remains of New Spain, Viceroy Cortez had always distrusted its walls. A massive city, built near Panama, Isabella City was always too vulnerable to an attack.

His military staff were French, he knew; apart from one who was a descendent of an Aztec commander when Cortez's distant ancestor had conquered the Aztecs and their subject civilisations. Three hundred years of development later, and massive investment by the French, the Mexican people had been forged into one nation, one that was staunchly Catholic and determined to fight a holy war with the Protestants in the north.

The meeting room had been designed, rumour had it, by the original Cortez himself. Viceroy Cortez knew that that was nonsense; Cortez had been disgraced and then died long before the palace was ever conceived of. It was just another lie designed to keep him – and his family, the last pure Spanish noble family – in power. If they ever lost their importance, he suspected, the French would take over...and New Spain's unique identity would be lost.

“The British and their American lackeys are massing then,” he said, as the map was unfurled. New Spain was littered with telegraph cables; the handful of tribesmen who had damaged them had been exterminated until the lesson had sunk in – if there were any left.

General Bether nodded slowly. He wore the famed stovepipe hat of the French Army, but his face was grim under the ceremonial uniform. “They are massing near El Paso,” he said. The tiny town sat near the border between New Spain and the North American Union. It also had more spies and sabotage operators than any other town its size. “There is also a second, smaller, development near Corpus Christi. This attack...looks to be more serious than their other attacks.”

Viceroy Cortez inclined his head. His family had considered attempting gaining independence for New Spain – under their rule, of course. But with the Americans on the border, only the equal might of the French Empire kept them out...along with nearly two centuries without a major war. Except, if half the reports about the *George Washington* were accurate, the war was about to take a major shift in the wrong direction.

“In fact, they have several hundred of the new land ironclads,” Bether continued. “It is quite likely that they will punch through the defences.”

Cortez drew in a long breath. “What about the new aircraft?” He asked. New Spain had quite a capable aircraft industry; it had been a requirement for control of the Caribbean – before the British developments had shown them how much more was needed. “Can they not hold back the enemy?”

“We’ve been raiding Fort Robertson and the other forts, including the new Fort Pillowcase,” General Bether admitted. Cortez smiled; whoever had named Fort Pillowcase that name almost had to have come from the other reality. “The problem is that we have so far failed to mount a proper air offensive.”

What he carefully did not say was that British/American fighters had harried the bombers quite badly. “The effects, Your Highness, have been very light, at least from the reports of our agents in place. We can expect an attack within a week at most – I would not be surprised if the attack actually came today.

For a moment, Cortez felt for the small general. Accustomed to the old style of warfare, adapted for modern technology, General Bether had been forced to adapt to technology that had appeared literally out of nowhere. He fought down the reaction; who knew where *that* would end up, and composed himself.

“Can you hold them?” He asked bluntly, wishing that Paris had seen fit to send him more information. Rumour had it that the French had a super-ship of their own, but apart from a chain of submarine-delivered plans for various fighting machines, there had been little help from Paris. Pre-war planning had accepted that that would likely be the case – both sides were watching for a chance to trap and destroy part of their opponent’s fleet – and so New Spain had been built into a formidable industrial power.

“I’m not certain,” General Bether admitted. He tapped the map, leading his finger down into Mexico – one region of New Spain. “They might reach as far as Mexico City, if I understand some of the possibilities correctly, but by then we

will have the heavy anti-land ironclad guns ready.”

Cortez stared at him. “You are talking about them hopping as far as” – he struggled for the distance – “around four hundred miles,” he gasped. “You have got to be wrong.”

“I don’t know,” General Bether admitted. His face twisted; Cortez felt little sympathy. “They’ll certainly chew up the divisions along the border, and if I was in their place that’s what I would do, then they’ll head south. In the same time, we have to move to counter them as quickly as we can, and we’ll be doing that with weapons that can take out the land ironclads – assuming that we get them into position.”

He’d explained it all once before, but Cortez held up a hand before he launched into a repeat explanation. “I think that the main line of attack will be on land,” he said firmly. “I want you to prepare to defend New Spain.”

General Bether gave him a sharp look. “Your Highness, that is what we have been doing,” he said. “The rules have suddenly changed...”

“And we are Spaniards,” Cortez said, taking an unholy delight in lumping Frenchmen and Spaniards together. “Move your guns into position, General Bether; they will show the angle of attack and then you can move to counter.”

General Bether left, allowing Cortez some time to think. Was there an opportunity for him within this problem? Perhaps...even, a chance of independence?

Amherst

North American Union (TimeLine B)

General Sir Andrew Drake had been the senior officer in the North American Army long enough to be uncomfortable at the thought of the new Model Army, but his concern for his men had made him determined to give the new technology a try, if nothing else. He had learnt to play politics – people didn’t spend time in Amherst, or Canberra, or Cape Town, or London without learning to do that – but he would have preferred to have been in the field.

Prime Minister Lord Roger Adams understood. It had been nearly seven months since the *George Washington* had arrived, and everything was on the verge of tipping over. No one had expected that women would go to Springfield to work –

despite the ravings of the society ladies – or that the factories would expand so fast. He would have preferred to have had a clear enemy as well – someone he could shoot at without facing prison.

He smiled suddenly. If he had been allowed to carry weapons within the House of Parliament, it would have made debates a lot simpler...

“The New Model Army is ready for its first attack,” Sir Andrew informed him. Adams nodded. “They’re going to attack at dawn, in an hour.”

Adams shrugged, refusing to reveal his nervousness. He’d burnt more political capital than he was really comfortable with, just to handle all of the changes to the North American Union. He’d had to convince the Admiralty to allow the conversion of nine battlecruisers to aircraft carriers, the Royal Flying Corps to accept some new aircraft, the Marines to support the creation of a new unit...and the army to accept the new vehicles.

“I have nothing to add,” he said. He could have ordered the attack cancelled, but what good would that have done. “It’s General Smith, isn’t it?” Sir Andrew nodded. “Tell him, tell everyone, that I said good luck – and may God be with them.”

Near El Paso

New Spain (TimeLine B)

The landscape was desolate, almost like the surface of the moon. The tanks moved forward slowly, passing over the sites of endless battles, when American and New Spanish alike had discovered that the war would not be over by Christmas. Nearly five hundred tanks were taking place in the attack, spread out enough to avoid a collision, and at the same time close enough for mutual support.

Captain Scott Martin peered through the periscope as the tank moved onwards, heading towards the Spanish positions. The driver, a new addition to the crew since it had finally managed to penetrate the military bureaucracy that the commander had better things to do than drive *and* command at the same time, followed his muttered instructions, although he watched through his own periscope.

He checked the map quickly, knowing that they would encounter the Spanish soon. It was impossible that the Spanish didn’t know that they were coming; the

Spanish, like the Americans, had pickets out in the night. Dawn was rising...and soon they would be able to see the tanks directly and...

“Incoming,” he snapped, as the first shell landed nearby. “Driver, forward!”

The tank roared with power and surged forward. Mechanical failure, he’d been informed, had been a persistent problem in the alternate reality, but at least the North American Union had *some* advantages. *Their* tanks rarely failed; only two had had to return to Fort Pillowcase.

“There,” he snapped, as the tank’s hull began to ring with bullets. A series of Spanish trenches lay ahead, machine gunners already emptying their fire onto the tanks. It was useless; the tanks were too well armoured to be stopped. The driver charged straight at the defenders...and some of the defenders broke, running from the battle.

“Fire,” he snapped, and the gunners opened up as one, spraying the defenders with bullets. The tank charged forward, crushing its way over a trench and rolling down slightly before its treads caught the opposite side of the trench. The driver paused to allow the gunners to clear the trench...before moving further south.

WHAM! A shell landed far too close to them, the gunners lowering their weapons and firing directly at the tanks. Martin cursed as three tanks were destroyed in quick succession, for the first time understanding the violence implicated in alternate warfare. The crewmen of the tank, those lucky enough to escape, were mown down like they were nothing.

“Kill them all,” he snapped, and then swore as a brave Spaniard ran close enough to one of the tanks to throw a satchel charge onto the hull. The tank shattered; the sheath of armour literally blown off. “Shoot them all down!”

“The infantry is moving up,” buzzed in his earphones. Green-clad Americans moved forward behind the tanks, supporting them and remaining behind the protective armour. Martin barked orders; the tanks moved forwards towards the guns, the gunners now firing as soon as they saw a target. The Spanish tried to fight, but it was hopeless; the tanks crunched towards them and overran the guns.

“Secure this location,” he ordered, realising the cost of success as opposed to failure. The tanks were running short of ammunition and there were dozens of wounded infantry nearby. “Collect the prisoners; send them back behind our lines.”

Orbiting high overhead, a single recon drone provided better coverage than anything available to Haig or Foch when the first tanks had been used in battle, transmitting its signal back to the headquarters at Fort Pillowcase. An AWACS, hiding far behind the lines, continued to monitor the situation as enemy fighters clashed with British and American fighters; the Spitfires facing off against...well, Spitfires.

Great minds think alike, I suppose, Colonel Sir Benjamin Phillips thought, as the aerial battle continued. Too high for anti-aircraft guns to play a role, the battle was dependent upon the pilots, fighting it out with some limited help from the AWACS. A primitive IFF signal, broadcasting from each of the American planes, kept them from shooting down one another – and allowed the AWACS to keep track of the battle – and honours seemed to be even so far.

Sir Benjamin shook his head. Thousands of aircraft, testimonials to the awesome industry of both the North American Union and New Spain, were clashing high overhead, and he could see nothing of the battle. From the air, it must have been very confusing; the IFF signal only worked half the time anyway. It would be a long time before electronic ‘sort and shoot’ systems were in common use in TimeLine B.

“A success, I suppose,” General Smith said. The short general had been a militia officer before the war had begun; he showed more concern for his men than Sir Benjamin had expected from a general who was fighting the equivalent of World War One. “I think that the first battle has proven a success.”

Sir Benjamin looked over at the massive screen, cannibalised from the *Washington*. The AWACS could provide a perfect breakdown of active tanks – and inactive, which meant destroyed, tanks – which could then be matched with the images from the drone and represented in a neat bloodless image.

“Yes, I suppose,” he said. “Of course, there are thousands of other trenches, and guns, and shelling...”

General Smith sighed. The Spanish had begun heavy shelling as soon as they’d finally realised that this was the ‘Big Push.’ Thousands of shells had landed on tank yards, barracks and no-man’s-land, hammering the Americans as they advanced. The Spanish might be practically slaves to France, but they were brave. No one, not even the worst member of the American Independence Party,

questioned that.

“There’s the fortress ahead, as well,” he said. Sir Benjamin nodded; the massive fortress had been built in the days before shelling had been invented – and was likely to pose a problem even now. The Spanish had built a colossal line of defences, and now they would all be on alert. “How would your people deal with that?”

“Bunker-buster weapon,” Sir Benjamin said absently. “We’ll just have to shell it until they surrender, or just punch through the line and surround it.”

General Smith nodded. “An attack would be too costly,” he agreed. “We’ll have to move forward slowly.”

An alarm bleeped from the screen and both men turned their attention towards it. A single red icon was marching across the screen. As they watched, three more joined it, advancing from the fortress.

General Smith spoke first. “What the hell are they?”

Sir Benjamin smiled grimly. “French tanks,” he said. He chuckled. “At least they’re not French letters.”

He picked up his radio and muttered instructions. “I just sent a bazooka team forward,” he said. “It might be possible to take them out without the bazookas, but just in case...”

Captain Scott Martin had discovered that one problem with the tanks was that they outran their own supply chain. Having punched through the first line of defences, the tanks had had to wait for resupply, while fending off occasional infantry counter-attacks. He was relieved when three trucks arrived with their supplies; the tanks had been getting very low on ammunition indeed.

“Check your fuel,” he snapped into his radio, directing the other tanks to do the same. The original plan had been to hammer the Spanish all along the line, but some attacks had clearly been more successful than others. He knew that they should be moving forward, just to prevent the Spanish from mounting a more successful counter-attack, but the generals behind the lines were still arguing about the next step. For his money, the choice was obvious; push on until they

met something powerful enough to stop them.

His radio beeped and he listened with one ear, cursing as the message came through. "Mount up," he snapped into the radio, and then screamed outside to the drivers who had been outside, having a quick smoke. "Come on; the enemy are sending their own fucking tanks!"

"I thought they didn't have any," the driver snapped, as he revved up the engine. "Where are they?"

"Only half a mile from us," Martin snapped back. "No one told them that they had no fucking tanks and..."

A shell landed too near to their position for comfort, suggesting that the Spanish had managed to sneak an observer close by with a field telephone. "Move out," he snapped, ordering the driver to move the tank before a shell landed on their heads. "Move south and..."

"Enemy tanks," one of the gunners said. Martin cursed; he'd thought that they were further away than that. He swung the periscope around to see the enemy tank; it looked more dangerous than theirs did. "Captain..."

He swore as the tank swung around to reveal its big gun. It was more of a self-propelled cannon than anything else, already firing on an American tank. The target exploded as the shell blasted through its armour, the enemy's gun already moving to target the next American tank.

"Fire," Martin snapped. The gunners fired, spraying the enemy tank with machine gun bullets, but it was useless; the enemy tank had as much armour as their own. Martin scowled; he'd had a thought, but...

"Hit the treads," he snapped, as he realised the enemy's possible weakness. "Fire and tear them to spreads..."

"Firing," the gunner said, as he opened fire. The others followed suit, trying to wreck the enemy vehicle, already knowing that they had failed and...

A streak of light streaked through the air and slammed into the enemy tank, destroying it. Martin relaxed, feeling an unaccustomed warmth around his trouser legs, as the three following enemy tanks were picked off by the bazooka teams.

“Let’s not do that again,” he said, knowing just how close the offensive had come to total disaster. “Sir?”

The radio buzzed. “That’s seems to be the end of the tank-counterattack,” he said, hoping that the generals had gotten it right. “We’re to secure this area, and then proceed onwards.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Caribbean Crazy

Caribbean Waters

North American Union/New Spain (TimeLine B)

The nine *Benedict Arnold*-class aircraft carriers, named for one of the heroes of the Global War, could carry around ninety aircraft. Despite being built on battlecruiser hulls – having been originally designed and constructed as battlecruisers – they were actually a little slower than the standard battlecruiser, such as the *Amherst*. From the bridge of his ship, Admiral Anderson watched as dawn rose slowly above his small force, only thirty-one ships.

And didn't the name cause such a fuss, he thought, as the carriers turned into the wind, preparing to launch their aircraft. Benedict Arnold had served the United Empire well – in *both* timelines. Who would have thought that his service in the aborted revolution – which hadn't been that impressive – had turned to outright treachery in the successful revolution?

Shaking his head, he resumed his worrying. One advantage, he supposed, of the enforced delay – apart from rebuilding the half-completed ships – had been the chance to rebuild parts of the *Amherst* and her consorts; he now had more mobile firepower than any comparable force – and he would even have been willing to take on a superdreadnaught. Simply having the perfect communications though the ship – and outside, with the other ships – had doubled the offensive capability of the ships – and as for the radar.

He smiled a hunter's smile and then remembered the counterpart. No one – not even Admiral Jackson – knew exactly what the French alternatives from Timeline A could have done to *their* cousins. Had they introduced better radar? Had they invented something that would neglect all of the *Amherst's* modifications? Had they brought some super weapons of their own to New Spain?

He frowned, remembering some of the briefings on board the *Washington*. If the French had transported to New Spain a full ECM system, then the French knew his force was here, simply by tracking his radar systems and radios. If so – in their place, he would be preparing a trap. Even with the new systems, defending carriers against air attack was difficult.

“The carriers are signalling that they're ready to launch,” Commander Crun

informed him. His CAG – Commander Air Group – was an innovation from the alternatives; an officer dedicated to operating the air wing. Normally, he would have been on the *Benedict Arnold*; Anderson had ordered him to remain on the *Amherst* for the first mission.

“Order the *Benedict Arnold* to launch the first AWACS,” Anderson ordered. The AWACS – another term borrowed from the alternatives – wasn’t anything like a capable as their AWACS, but it hardly required a specialised launch system. *He’d* thought of the concept; a Lancaster bomber adapted with the most powerful radar that the North American Union could build.

“Aye, aye sir,” Crun said, whispering orders into his radio set. Anderson turned, staring through the growing light to see the *Benedict Arnold* – and the aircraft slowly rising off its decks. He felt a moment of panic – surely it was rising too slowly – but then it faded; the aircraft was in the air.

If they have a dedicated ECM suite, we’re fucked, he thought wryly. His force had war-gamed with aircraft from the *Washington* – and it would be folly to assume that the French aircraft were less capable - and they’d lost, badly. Of course, the French would have the same problem with replacing their lost weapons, but it would still be chancy to engage the *Charles de Gaulle* itself.

Maggie, I wish you were weren’t here, he thought. Maggie had insisted on coming with the fleet - and Admiral Sir Joseph Porter hadn’t been willing to forbid it. That itself was...odd; a civilian had no place on board a warship, particularly one that was about to challenge the French naval base at Panama.

As if the thought itself was enough to summon her – his wild Irish rose – she stepped onto the bridge, escorted by the steward. Anderson nodded at him, dismissing him with a nod, and waved her over. He resisted the temptation to give her a hug; the bridge was no place for such games.

“Admiral, the AWACS is reporting clear skies,” Crun said. “All of the aircraft are ready.”

Anderson felt...nervous, a nervousness that hadn’t been a problem since stepping onto the bridge of the first ship he’d ever commanded. He was about to take a completely untested – at least in this reality – concept into battle...and he was nervous. Losing would probably cost him...his career.

“Signal the carriers,” he said. “They’re to launch at once...and proceed with the

attack plan. God save the King.”

Flying Officer Creswell took a breath as his Spitfire-I accelerated down towards the ramp, hitting it and climbing into the air. He watched as the carrier vanished below him, replaced by an endless blue sea, and sighed in relief as the aircraft kept rising. Back on training, several aircraft hadn't caught properly – and promptly fallen off the end of the carrier instead of rising into the sea.

“This is Air Commodore Cromwell,” the commanding officer said. Apart from the AWACS, the Commodore rode in the only large aircraft; a modified Lancaster carrying an active radar set and one of the priceless ECM units from the *Washington*. “All planes; proceed along the following course” – he rattled off a series of instructions – “and prepare to engage the enemy.”

Creswell allowed himself a moment to feel nervous. The Spitfire-I aircraft hadn't ever fought for real, unlike their comrades on the Southern Front. Scuttlebutt from the first major battle, two days ago, suggested that they had a slight turning advantage on the French aircraft, but the French aircraft were better armoured. The explosive bullets should make a difference, but no one knew for sure.

He wished that *they* had been allowed to actually practice on other planes, even though he understood that it wasn't possible. The Spitfire-II aircraft had been permitted to sink several test ships with the new torpedoes; *they* knew what they were doing. It was Commodore Cromwell's job to lead them to Panama - and Creswell's job to keep the French planes off their back when they were attacking the French fleet.

“We're picking up radar signals,” Cromwell said. Creswell scowled; as much as he appreciated radar, he thought that he would have appreciated it more if it had been an exclusive British technology. “We must assume that we have been detected.”

“Understood,” Creswell said, sounding off for his entire flight. “Any additional orders for us?”

“No,” Cromwell said. “Twenty minutes to target.”

Without false modesty, Duke Labara knew that he wasn't the brightest Admiral in the French Navy, but he was a competent commander and a brilliant administrator. The fortification of the massive anchorage at Panama, right next to the canal itself, had been acknowledged as the foremost defensive work in the world – right next to the defences of London itself. With four admirals under him, one commanding each of his superdreadnaught squadrons, Duke Labara was well equipped to carry out his orders, which were to defend Panama and engage in a limited amount of raiding in the Caribbean and the Pacific.

His massive office had four clerks; all working to ensure that the French ships within the anchorage got the best that New Spain could produce, from equipment to food and women. The French Navy had always taken a pragmatic approach to prostitution, despite the loudly-expressed opinion of the Pope and his Church, and as long as the women were *clean*, they didn't object. Duke Labara was reading the latest medical report when his telephone rang.

“Your Grace, there is something you should see on the radar,” Major Malfoy said. “You have to come to the radar room.”

The urgency in his voice did nothing to improve Duke Labara's mood. He didn't like radar, he didn't like the radar operators – who were hardly the sort of men he wanted serving the Emperor – and he just plain didn't like Malfoy. The young man was one of the technicians, which meant that instead of risking his life on the high seas, he sat in comfort in Panama, using the whores and doing his unprepossessing work.

“This had better be important,” he said sharply, putting down the phone. He nodded to his clerks as he left the room, before heading down to the radar room. Massive radar arrays had been constructed on Panama, covering all of the mountains...but all of the information was collected in the naval base itself – by Malfoy and his people. The room that housed the young men, a messy room filled with consoles and half-opened pieces of electronic equipment, didn't really suit the attitudes of the French Navy at all - Duke Labara kept petitioning the Court to have Malfoy removed on the grounds that he was clearly unsuited to his role in the Navy.

“This had better be important,” he said, and then frowned as he saw Malfoy. The young man was always dapper, in a light blonde wig that had been moved into the most outrageous style, but sweat was pouring down his face. Unlike some of the Nordic people, Malfoy was from France itself; he should be used to the tamed

jungle of Panama.

“We’re about to be attacked,” Malfoy said. He pointed to a screen; several lights glittered within the strange screen. Duke Labara had never even begun to understand radar. “That’s nearly nine hundred planes coming our way, Your Grace.”

Duke Labara stared at him. “How could the British have gotten a flight of planes so close to us?” He demanded. “Don’t you have any idea how far this is from Cuba, let alone the closest British-held island?”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Malfoy said. His tone was desperate. “Your Grace; we are about to be attacked. That’s an entire bomber force.”

Duke Labara hesitated. “You want me to scramble all of the fighters on the airfields?” He asked. “Just for nine hundred impossible aircraft?”

Malfoy hesitated. “Your Grace, ever since that ship from another reality turned up, we’ve seen dozens of impossible aircraft,” he said, rather gently. He hesitated. “They might be flying them off the...*George Washington*.”

Duke Labara took a breath. He *really* didn’t like the young man. On the other hand, even Malfoy would not be stupid enough to convince him to issue an alert for nothing. He held Malfoy’s eyes for a long moment, and then he made his decision.

“This is Duke Labara,” he said, into the telephone on the wall. “I am hereby declaring an emergency. All aircraft are to be launched at once, I repeat; launched at once. All anti-aircraft gunners are to take their stations at once. All personnel without duties during an emergency are to go to the shelters.”

The general alarm began to howl. “That’s our aircraft,” Malfoy said after a moment, pointing at new lights flickering on the screen. “And that’s the enemy aircraft.”

“All right, we’ve been made,” Cromwell said. Creswell nodded; he’d already seen the orbital Combat Air Patrol orbiting over Panama – and the aircraft that were straggling up to join them. “All fighters, chose your targets and dance.”

“Independent action,” Creswell ordered his group, and pushed the throttle forward. The Spitfire leapt forward, its speed increasing as it moved ahead of the other fighters and torpedo bombers, turning to face the enemy planes ahead. He pressed the trigger on his guns as soon as the first enemy plane came into range... and he was gratified to note it begin to smoke and fall towards the water far below.

“Watch out,” one of his wingmen snapped over the radio, as a French plane made a dive at him. He flipped out of the way, powering down towards the sea and spinning across the sky, finally pulling out of the dive just above another French plane. He fired at it as it flashed past, but he couldn’t see if he hit it or not.

“Fast little buggers,” he muttered, as a French aircraft dove on him. He pressed the trigger and raked it with bullets, watching as the bullets exploded and detonated the Frenchman’s fuel tank. “Sorry,” he said, as the plane exploded; there had been no chance of escape for the pilot.

“Don’t be sorry,” Cromwell snapped over the intercom. “Cover the torpedo-bombers!”

Creswell cursed rudely and spun around, watching as the torpedo-bombers made their run towards the harbour walls, ignoring the hail of fire from guns designed to take out superdreadnaughts. The French fighters were swooping down on the bombers, having realised what a threat they were to their ships, and hacking them out of the sky.

“Die, you bastards,” Creswell howled, and flung himself into the fight. The battle was savage and vicious, at point-blank range, all of the planes fighting at knife-range. He fired on two French aircraft and watched them explode – just before seeing one of the torpedo-bombers crash into a gun emplacement. The resulting series of explosions shattered the guns as the shells detonated – damaging the anti-aircraft guns on the walls.

“Die,” he snapped, and the fighting continued...

Duke Labara prayed as he ran up the stairs, passing concrete walls as he ran, until he reached the balcony of the main fortress. He knew that it was suicidal, perhaps,

but he no longer cared – the inevitable inquest would ruin his career as certainly as a British bullet would cut his life short.

The radar men will inherit the Earth, he thought, as he flung the iron door opened and stared out across the harbour. It all seemed to be happening in a deadly slow motion; the British planes were making torpedo runs at the superdreadnaughts and battlecruisers in harbour, damaging and destroying them. Even as he watched, a battlecruiser exploded; it's back broken when its powder magazines detonated.

Planes flashed by overhead, so fast he could hardly make them out, locked in a deadly mortal combat. There was no tactics in the midst of anti-aircraft fire, no long-term strategy, just endless bloody combat. The noise was appalling; a deafening crescendo of fire and death, explosions and screams. He stared as a fresh cloud of aircraft descended upon a superdreadnaught, launching seven torpedoes directly at its heart. A shattering series of explosions tore the hull to ribbons.

Should have installed anti-torpedo nets, Duke Labara thought, stunned. He'd heard about the attack on the Falklands, but he hadn't really believed, not until... not until his career had been wrecked beyond repair – along with most of the fleet in Caribbean waters. The attack seemed to be fading...and then one final explosion shattered the fuel tanks, specifically targeted by the enemy. A blast wave swept across the harbour, plucked Duke Labara from his balcony...and sent him falling to his death, seven floors below.

Creswell cursed as he ran out of ammunition, firing his last bullets at a French fighter that had been within moments of blasting a bomber out of the air. He muttered into his radio, reporting his sudden inability to fight, and was ordered to return home.

"I think it's time to take our leave," Cromwell said. "Radar reports more aircraft coming at us, and that's not good at all."

"Be seeing you," Creswell called, down towards the harbour below, and set course for the carriers. "We'll be back."

There were three people in the stateroom; Anderson, Maggie and Crun. Anderson

knew that there should have been a chaperone for Maggie, now that their relationship was...blossoming, but he found it hard to care. As night fell, the task force was counting up its losses...and steaming as hard as it could for American waters.

“We launched eight hundred aircraft,” Crun said. His tiredness showed in his face, in his voice. “Three hundred or thereabouts have been lost outright; one hundred and seventy will require various amounts of repairs before they can fly again. As it was, we were lucky; the *Elizabeth* was nearly destroyed by a crashed fighter.”

Anderson shook his head slowly. “How much damage did we do?”

“Hard to be certain,” Crun said. “A recon drone is on its way – it should get there before night falls completely – but at least three of the primary targets were destroyed.”

Anderson nodded. It wouldn’t take the French long to repair the radar installations, but it would take them longer to repair the fuel depots and the damaged buildings. As for the ships...

“We must have damaged them quite badly,” he said.

Crun nodded. “We caught them with their pants down...sorry madam,” he said. Maggie shrugged. “Next time; they’ll pay more attention to their radar and have more fighters aloft at any one time.”

Anderson scowled. “And perhaps submarines to defend the approaches,” he said. One of the reasons his force was moving so fast was that submarines, by and large, were very slow. If one of them were close enough to take a shot, it would almost certainly miss – and probably pass unnoticed.

“We’ll think of some new tricks,” Crun said. “Perhaps raids with fighters only, sir; ones designed to strip away their fighter cover.”

“They’ll be launching counter-attacks,” Anderson said. “New Orleans is about to get hammered, along with the bases in Florida.”

“I’m afraid so,” Crun said. He yawned. “Sorry, sir,” he said. “It’s been a long day.”

“Go get some sleep,” Anderson said. He waited until Crun was out of the door

before turning to Maggie. “Was it as exciting as you thought?”

Maggie smiled up at him. “It was interesting,” she said. “Admiral – Felix – is it always this way?”

Anderson understood the unasked question. “Yes,” he said, standing up and pacing the stateroom. “People go out, live or die, and the enemy learns from us as much as we learn from him.”

“And they’ll have new tricks from the French ship,” Maggie said. “Felix, thank you for all of this.”

Anderson came over to her as she stood up. She was no longer seasick; she’d adapted better than many men did on their first sea voyage. “You’re welcome,” he said, suddenly feeling as tongue-tied as a teenager on his first chaperoned meeting with a girl. “Thanks for coming.”

Maggie reached out and drew him to her, taking comfort from his hug. On their own, his lips reached down and met hers and they kissed. “Felix...”

“I understand,” Anderson said, as they broke the kiss. He bent down for **another one**. “**I love you too.**”

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Cuban Adventures

Spanish Gulf (Gulf of Mexico)

Caribbean (TimeLine B)

For the first time since arriving at New Orleans, the *George Washington* was sailing forth, accompanied by four superdreadnaughts and an entire fleet of escorts. Sitting on the bridge, Captain Morrigan knew that Admiral Sir Joseph Porter had been reluctant to risk the *Washington*, even though the French had nothing that could touch it – or so they thought. The French might have anti-ship missiles from *their* super-ship, after all.

He smiled as the carrier picked up speed, heading towards Cuba. In theory – and pretty much in practice – they could have struck at Cuba from Florida, but Admiral Jackson had insisted upon the *Washington* putting to sea – it had been too long since they'd done any proper flying. Captain Morrigan smiled; it had indeed been too long.

“We’re not supposed to worry about politics,” he muttered, as the ships checked in. Admiral Jackson, sitting in the CIC, had been placed in command of the fleet, replacing Sir Joseph himself. The British Admiral hadn’t been worried; the British were used to trading commanding officers in Empire waters. He shook his head; a system that placed one officer in command of a land station, but not of a war fleet was strange, to say the least.

But we’re strange too to them, he thought, watching as the screen adjusted, tracking French and American – United Empire – movements all across the Caribbean. The swarm attack on Panama – an attempt to redo Pearl Harbour – had been launched, under the command of Admiral Anderson. Other attacks, on the ground and the air, had been launched, although the offensive was slowing down in Mexico.

“The radio reports that the fleet is ready,” Gavin Brown said. The radio officer was newly promoted; the original officer had been too important to risk losing. He now ran a machine shop in Springfield, building radios and other electronic equipment. “The transports are ready for servicing their targets.”

“Excellent,” Admiral Jackson’s voice said, over the intercom. “Captain; you may launch your strikes at once.”

Morrigan scowled. He'd been...reluctant to waste a handful of precision weapons, even though the Spanish defences were tougher than the hardly-guided bombers could handle, but Admiral Jackson had overruled him. They had to make some kind of commitment to the cause – particularly if they actually wanted Cuba for themselves.

“Yes, sir,” he said. There was no time for reopening the debate; even if Jackson would have allowed it...it was time to go to war. He glanced over at the CAG. “Commence launching the flight,” he ordered.

Captain Rupert Potter relaxed as the F-18 launched itself into the sky, its electronics automatically picking up and sorting contacts from the orbiting AWACS, before setting his course towards Cuba. The skies were blue – and he was happy.

“Eagle-one, en route,” he said. His radar was already reporting the rising Spanish fighters from the single airbase, older designs rather than the modern ones doing battle over the Southern Front. Cuba, he realised, was almost undefendable against a determined assault – if the British forces were prepared to soak up the casualties. If the Spanish Army failed to evict the landing forces – and with proper support for the British the defenders would never manage to even get into firing range. If that was true, then whoever was in charge of the other side knew better than to waste aircraft defending it.

Bastard slaveholders, he thought. Most of New Spain was fairly well governed, they'd been told, but Cuba was a disgrace. The handful of remains of the natives, heavily interbred, supported by Negro slaves, criminals and people the French Court simply wanted to be rid of, forced together and forced to work for their lives.

“Eagle-one, be warned that there will be anti-aircraft fire,” the AWACS said. “Radar traces – their radar has improved since the last contact near the Falklands.”

Potter nodded grimly. The radar on the Falklands had been barely able to track the F-18s, only picking up hints of their presence. If the French had managed to improve their radar – so, what did it matter? Even if they could *see* the F-18s, did they have anything that could shoot them down?

“Understood,” he said. New contacts appeared on his display, tagged as friendly; the Lancaster bombers from Cuba. “Are we going in first?”

“It looks that way,” the AWACS said. “Good hunting...”

“All units, pick your targets and dance,” Potter said, pushing the aircraft forward. Sonic booms followed in their wake as they charged forwards, automatic targeting systems locking onto the Spanish aircraft, hacking them out of the sky before they knew what had hit them. They weren’t a threat to the fighters, but they might have hurt the bombers – and that would have been bad.

“All enemy fighters down,” the AWACS said. “Cleared to engage the main targets.”

Cuba lay below them, still large even at their height, sparkling with black smoke – attempts by the anti-aircraft gunners to interfere with their mission. Potter ignored them, checking the location beacons...and released the bunker-buster weapon he carried. It fell towards the ground, picking up speed...and drove itself into one of the largest castle-like buildings. The shattering explosion could be seen from their height; some weapons must have been detonated.

“That’ll show the slave-fuckers,” one of his pilots shouted, as the explosions billowed up. “Orders?”

“We confirm targets destroyed,” the AWACS said. “You are cleared to return to the *Washington*.”

“Understood,” Potter said. He took one last look at Cuba, so different than Castro’s world in his own timeline, and set course back to the carrier. The slaves down below would be lucky if they lived in Castro’s Cuba, rather than the unending sink of misery below.

The idea, like many good ideas, was simple and brilliant. The aircraft, in this case a line of Lancaster bombers, would fly along a directed radio beam, using it to navigate all the way to Cuba. When the signal crossed a *second* signal, it would serve as a signal to drop the bombs. As long as the calculations were correct, it was a certain way of hitting the target.

The Lancaster bombers droned through the day, heading for Cuba. There had

been twenty-four castles on the island; now there were only twenty. Each of them had a flight of bombers assigned to cover it...and to hit it with all the bombs the Lancaster could carry. Time passed endlessly as Cuba grew closer...

"The anti-aircraft fire is picking up," the co-pilot observed. "I think they know we're here."

"Radar, our noise, their own aircraft," Pilot Dowling said dryly. "I think that they've always been aware of our coming, Fred."

Fred smiled at him. He'd been wanting to fly one of the new fighters, but he was too tall for the cockpits, having been streamed into the bomber crews instead. "The alternate aircraft took care of their targets," he said. "They handled the tough ones..."

"Lucky bastards," Dowling scowled. He'd wanted to fly one of *those* aircraft, but apparently there were no training programs for *their* aircraft. "And what about the signal?"

He glared at a dedicated radio receiver, which was beeping merrily and driving him mad. It had been designed to help keep him awake, but he found it maddening. The beeps continued, without changing, indicating that they were still on the right flight path – but nothing else.

"Are you bastards' fine down there?" He shouted. No intercom for a *military* aircraft, even if the original design had been based on a civilian aircraft. "Are you ready to drop the unpleasant packages?"

He didn't know why the alternatives were almost...ashamed of their own weapons, to say nothing of the weapons they'd given to the pilots and the United Empire. The bombs the plane carried had been designed to *really* mess up a castle, dropping a bomb weight larger than any artillery used on the Southern Front.

"Yes, boss, we're ready," the bombardier shouted back. "Are we nearly there yet?"

Dowling chuckled. "We'll be there in moments," he said, as the first anti-aircraft shells exploded near the aircraft. He cursed and swung the Lancaster from side to side, trying to present a difficult target to the Spanish below. The tone of the direction-finder altered as they moved in and out of the signal, trying to warn him

about the dangers of losing the signal altogether.

“I think we’re nearly there,” the co-pilot said. Dowling scowled, but swung the Lancaster back onto its original course, trying to avoid the shells. Ahead of them, he could see a castle...except it wasn’t quite a castle, more of a fortress.

The tone changed in a moment. “Bombs away,” he shouted. Seconds later, the Lancaster lightened as the bombs fell away, falling down towards the castle. The rest of the flight followed suit, hammering away at the castle and the surrounding buildings. Explosions billowed up from the castle below, but he couldn’t see how much effect they’d had.

“Time to leave,” Fred commented.

“No argument,” Dowling snapped. He checked the compass and then pulled the Lancaster away, heading back over the sea and then back towards Florida. “How well do you think we did?”

“I have no idea,” Fred said. “Still, we dropped nearly two thousand bombs on the place – we must have hit something vital.”

“Quite a disappointing result, really,” Jackson observed, as the smoke cleared. The castles targeted by the F-18s had been destroyed, and four more had been wrecked by the Lancaster bombers, but the others had hardly been damaged. It was...unsatisfactory.

“I think that we can still land,” Sergeant Jack Hawksmore observed. “We’ve damaged almost all of the castles in the east of Cuba; we land there and scratch the landing in the west.”

“I know,” Jackson said, wishing for the thousandth time that the Marine Expeditionary Unit had come through with them. “Send the orders, now.”

“Yes, sir,” Hawksmore said. Like the rest of them, he was working at several levels above his pay grade. “I’ll see to it at once.”

Fernando, sixth son of the famed Viceroy Cortez, knew that his life was nearly at

an end. His single – and traditional – attempt to seize the power of his father had resulted in him being dispatched to take over Cuba, generally considered the worst of the plantations in New Spain. Its proximity to Florida meant that escapees had somewhere to flee too...and the Governor of Florida refused to send back escaped slaves.

He pulled himself off the whore, a woman with Indian, Negro and Spanish blood inside her, and sent her packing with a kick. His castle, the centre of his defences, was in ruins; if he'd been inside, he realised dimly, he would have been killed. Most of the castle staff would have been killed as well, he realised, which meant...

Cursing, he grabbed for his trousers, thanking God that he always carried his weapons with him, and pulled them on. His jacket followed, including the priceless radio he always carried. Cuba was a big island and there were times that he left his castle, just to go walking. He'd broken the slaves, *they* posed no threat, but the same didn't apply to the British Royal marines, who might be storming ashore now.

"Sire," his butler called. His trusted assistant, Don Cervantes could always be relied on. "I feared that you were dead."

Fernando nodded once, and then checked the damage to the castle. It wasn't as bad as he had assumed – the whorehouses had been damaged too – and perhaps there would be enough survivors to mount a defence. He summoned up all the Cortez blood within his body, hoping that it wasn't that diluted, and started to bark orders. The important thing, now, was to take control and ensure that he never lost it...

And then perhaps Father will forgive me, he thought.

"Gather all of the soldiers and pay-servants together," he snapped, and started to pace around, trying to assess the damage. The walls were unbroken, keeping them safe from any slave revolts, but any force with modern weapons would punch through with ease. "Now, move it!"

Perhaps some urgency lunged through his voice. "Don" – using the butler's first name as an expression of favour – "what's happening at Havana?"

"It's been hit, but not badly," Cervantes said. Fernando nodded; Havana, the only real city on Cuba and his prize possession, was worth too much intact. "The ships

in the harbour have been battered; some of them have been damaged beyond easy repair.”

Fernando used a word his father would have beaten him for using. “Find out what the enemy is doing,” he said, and then corrected himself. The quickest way to being ignored – if not killed – was to start issuing impossible orders. “Can you get the landlines – *not* the radios – to get reports from all of the castles – those that survive? Tell the boss men that I want all the slaves in lockdown, now!”

Cervantes bowed and headed back towards the castle. One advantage of Cuba’s network was that it could be tapped from outside a formal castle if necessary. He watched as the remaining soldiers, only two hundred of them, gathered in front of him.

“Who’s in charge?” He asked. A young man held up his hand; the Colonel who was supposed to be commanding them was nowhere to be seen. The young... lieutenant looked nervous; Fernando knew how that felt. He wanted to chew the young man out, but he forced a calm tone onto his voice. “What’s your name, son?”

“Miguel, sire,” the lieutenant said. Like Fernando, he had clearly been exiled to Cuba. “I’m the sole surviving senior officer in the castle.”

Fernando – briefly – considered surrender, before dismissing it. “Very good,” he said. “*Captain* Miguel; you have just been declared my second. Assemble all of the men and stand ready to march to the sound of the guns.”

“Yes, sir,” Miguel said, pulling himself up into an impression of determination. “It will be done at once.”

“Good,” Fernando said, and turned to face Cervantes. “Well?”

“They’re going to land near Guanine,” Cervantes said. Fernando scowled; the tiny town served as the centre for the region, but if the castle had been taken out.

“There are two battlecruisers bombarding the town right now.”

“Then we move to Havana, at once,” Fernando said, dismissing any thought of riding to the rescue of the forces in the east. By the time they got there, it would all be over. “We’ll dig into the town.”

“Yes, sire,” Miguel said, when he explained his plan. They could reach Havana

with ease, he was sure; he said so in great detail. “We’ll move at once.”

Fernando shook his head. “Have all the wounded tended by the whores,” he said. “*Then* we can go.” He paused. “Oh, and inform Commodore...whatever his name is that I want the active ships out there, harassing their landing operations. The inactive ones are to add their shells to ours.”

Cuba, in the eyes of Colonel Crenshaw, stank; the island stank of thousands of people who were not free and could never hope to be free. From time to time, the Royal North American Navy plucked drowning escapees out of the water, people who had risked everything to flee the slave camps. As the landing craft closed in on the shore, he watched as the battlecruisers poured fire into the defences; there was hardly any counter-battery fire.

“Forward,” he snapped, as the boat touched down in the sandy beach. The beach was tiny; he leapt out of the boat and charged forwards, followed by his men. The landing craft had swept the beach clear of Spaniards, but there were more coming, even now. They were brave men, he realised, but totally unprepared for modern warfare.

“Mow them down,” he shouted, and threw himself to the ground. His rifle snapped off shots, striking soldiers and slavers alike; all who were attacking had to be stopped. “Hit them!”

“Here comes the secret weapon,” a man shouted. It wasn’t *secret*, not enough that the men of the Royal Marines didn’t know about it, but the Spanish wouldn’t know about it. Lurching off the first landing craft came the first ever amphibious tank – one designed for work in shallow waters. It splashed through the waters, riding up on the beach, and headed over the small ridge.

“Take that, you bastards,” someone shouted, as the tank rumbled over the ridge. The Spanish fired at it desperately and failed utterly; bullets sparked off its hull, but they couldn’t penetrate.

It won’t take them long to dig up something that can, he thought, as soon as the tank opened fire. Six machine guns swept across the Spanish position, utterly demoralising the survivors, who tried to surrender. Colonel Crenshaw knew his orders; anyone who tried to surrender was to be accepted, provisional to any war crimes trials.

“Take them alive,” he shouted, and the tank stopped firing, allowing his men to take the Spanish prisoner. Colonel Crenshaw watched as the tiny series of trenches, dug very quickly indeed, was emptied, the occasional holdout being quickly dispatched. “Now, move on to the town.”

His forces regrouped as the beachhead was expanded. The Spanish, much to his surprise, didn’t try to counterattack – which is what he would have done. As soon as he had assembled his forces, and enough soldiers and Marines landed to secure the beachhead indefinitely, he led his men towards the nearest town.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” one of his men whispered, as they came across their first body since the battle for the beachhead had ended. The Spaniard had been brutally killed – his penis had been cut off, his eyes had been poked out... and then he’d been left to die in the sun. “Who the hell did that?”

Colonel Crenshaw cast his eyes over the tiny huts and massive fields, too large for any private farmer, and knew the answer. “The slaves are revolting,” he said, and shuddered. If they were that mad at their ‘owners,’ and he could hardly blame them, then all hell had just broken out.

“All of us are to stay together,” he ordered. “I’m going to report this to the Admiral.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Desperate Times

Bourbon Palace

Paris, France (TimeLine B)

There was a religious belief, based upon the Papal Bull created at the behest of a previous emperor that the Emperor of France had divine sanction for any action he took on behalf of his people. Among other responsibilities the Papal Bull – written largely by the Emperor himself – gave him was the ‘keeping of the balance,’ a reference to the supreme power that was held by the Emperor. To the Emperor not only fell duties to God, but the right to decide what those duties *were*.

In his private moments, Prime Minister Vincent Pelletier wished that he possessed such power – or that the Emperor possessed it in anything beyond the power-mad dreams of one of his predecessors. Keeping the balance would be so much easier if the *Charles de Gaulle* and the *George Washington* had never arrived – and there was always the nagging worry about what might have fallen into other hands.

Privately, without telling anyone apart from the Emperor, Pelletier had ordered a very quiet search for any other ships that might have appeared within the French Empire. They had found nothing, none of the developed territories of Indochina, Africa or new Spain held any more ships – at least as far as they knew. The *Charles de Gaulle* wasn’t unique though; the *George Washington* existed and therefore other ships might also exist.

Pelletier scowled, hoping that Admiral Quirion, Minister of Marine, would get to the point. It was bad news, he knew; the grim expression on the Minister’s face only conformed it. Greetings and salutations in Christ were important – he’d been raised a devout Catholic himself – but how did they compare to news that affected the entire Empire?

He didn’t even want to think about the Catholics on the *Charles de Gaulle*. Not all of them had been happy with the version of the Catholic Church that existed in TimeLine B, some of them had even attempted to reach the Pope. All information involving *that* particular can of worms had been carefully classified, just to ensure that it never got out of control.

“Unfortunately, the attack on Panama was very successful,” Admiral Quirion admitted. “In effect, it has managed to seriously cripple a large number of ships.”

Pelletier scowled, trying to take the news calmly. “What happened, exactly?” He asked. “How did they manage to do it?”

“They launched an aerial attack,” Admiral Quirion said. “They must have managed to get their own carriers ready to move; the attack didn’t come from any British-held territory.”

Pelletier allowed himself a moment of mourning for the lost crewmen. “How bad was it?” He asked. “How many ships do we have left in that region?”

Admiral Quirion took a breath; Pelletier prepared himself as best as he could. “We had fifteen superdreadnaughts in the harbour at the time,” Admiral Quirion said. “Of those, five have been destroyed outright or damaged beyond repair...and then the others all need repairs of some kind or another.”

Pelletier took a deep breath. “I see,” he said coldly. “How exactly did this happen, when we knew what the alternate technology could do?”

“The attack was in greater force than the commander on the scene anticipated,” Admiral Quirion said. “He died in the attack.”

“How...convenient,” Pelletier murmured. Admiral Quirion lowered his eyes reluctantly. “So...we have fifteen superdreadnaughts destroyed or otherwise out of commission?” Admiral Quirion nodded. “In effect, we have no choice, but to concede the Caribbean?”

Admiral Quirion flinched at his tone. “Yes,” he said flatly. Pelletier almost admired the honesty he’d shown. “There are still twenty superdreadnaughts, but they have to be moved to the western side of Panama...”

Pelletier thought rapidly. Naval matters had never been an interest of his, but if the British had gained such superiority, then the war might be within shouting distance of being lost. If there were only twenty superdreadnaughts to fifty, even without a second carrier attack – assuming that carriers were capable of attacking surface ships, which *Contre-Admiral* François Videzun had sworn was possible – then the navy would be destroyed.

“Yes, Your Excellency,” Admiral Quirion said, as soon as Pelletier explained his

thoughts. “The Caribbean Squadrons cannot be sent up against the British now, or they will be lost for nothing.”

“I see,” Pelletier said coldly. “What about our own carriers?”

“We have seven of them working up now,” Admiral Quirion said grimly.

“Unfortunately, they’re in the Mediterranean – and it will take weeks to have them moved to the Caribbean.” He paused. “And, of course, they will be perfect targets for the *George Washington*’s fighters.”

Pelletier scowled. He understood the reluctance to send the *Charles de Gaulle* up against the American *George Washington*, but it would have been worth it if both ships had been lost, along with their annoying crews. Both ships simply made warfare too complicated – it was like grasping for money in a lake filled with scorpions.

“I think we’ll have to find some way of dealing with that ship,” he said. “So... what now?”

Admiral Quirion paused for a long moment. “I request permission to pull the remains of the fleet out of the Caribbean and away from America,” he said. “If we do that, then once the new Spain aircraft factories have built up the aircraft, they can return and take control of the Caribbean back.”

Pelletier frowned. Retreat – surrendering even part of France’s rights – wasn’t within his authority, unless it was really urgent. It was, he felt, but it was still dangerous to usurp some of the Emperor’s power.

“We can do the same to the Orkney Naval Base, can’t we?” He asked, and wondered if *Contre-Admiral* François Videzun hadn’t been right all along. The fighting was about to get a lot worse. “We can hammer Home Fleet as badly?”

“They have to have been moving their own aircraft production upwards as well,” Admiral Quirion said. “In a couple of weeks, we could send the carriers to launch such an attempt.”

Pelletier held his eyes. “And are our carriers as capable?”

Admiral Quirion nodded enthusiastically. “Oh, yes,” he said, and tried to essay a small joke. “After all, we’re both working from the same plans.”

Pelletier *looked* at him. “I hope that you’re right,” he said. “I have to see the Emperor as soon as possible.”

“You’ll need his permission to withdraw the ships,” Admiral Quirion agreed. “Your Excellency, I’m sorry about this...”

Pelletier glared at him. “We no longer control our lives,” he said. “What else is there to worry about?”

The Emperor looked...grey and went greyer as Pelletier reported the news from Admiral Quirion and then Viceroy Cortez. *They’d* chosen to concentrate on Europe; the United Empire had decided to focus on the Caribbean.

“There’s still heavy fighting going on, after a week,” Pelletier said. “It’ll be a while before they reach Mexico City, let alone Isabella. Now that they’ve overrun a few towns, we might see some resistance behind the lines.”

“Which will be crushed,” the Emperor said. The laws of war were very clear on that; soldiers and civilians out of uniforms could be shot out of hand. “They won’t stand a chance.”

“Even so, they’ll tie down some forces,” Pelletier said. “It’ll still take them time, in the new terrain, to hammer their way south.”

“They’ve already overrun the first two lines of defences,” the Emperor said. “My friend...do you think that we should call a halt to the war?”

Pelletier frowned. “Send a diplomatic envoy?” He asked. “That would show weakness?”

“We are weak,” the Emperor said. His voice was older than Pelletier cared to think about. “What happens when the Russians start building these land ironclads too?”

Pelletier frowned. “We do have land ironclads of our own,” he protested. “Indeed, the antitank land ironclads worked perfectly; there just weren’t enough of them. We’re building more in New Spain now and rushing them to the front. They may move forward, Your Majesty, but they’ll do it at higher and higher cost.”

The Emperor looked up at the map for a long moment. It was a work of art, drawn by a Lady of the Court. “And if we ask for peace, what will they demand?”

Pelletier hesitated. “They’ll certainly demand the Caribbean islands,” he said. “They’ve been on their want list ever since the Global War.” He paused to consider. “They might also demand a reduction in our naval strength, or even Indochina itself.”

“I might be tempted to let them have Indochina,” the Emperor said wryly. “It’s not as if it ever did us any real good, apart from the naval base.”

“We would lose influence in China,” Pelletier protested.

The Emperor snorted. “There are dozens, perhaps hundreds, of competing factions in China,” he said. “How many are we backing at the last count?”

Pelletier checked his notepad. “The agents in China are backing seventeen,” he said. “Three of them are major warlords.”

“I remain unconvinced,” the Emperor said. “Other than that...”

“We can attack Russia now, while we still have the advantage,” Pelletier said. “The Russians have shown no signs of possessing their own super-ship. In that event, we can crush their defence lines and push towards Moscow.”

The Emperor nodded slowly. “That would ensure that the British stay away from us,” he said. “They want Russia beaten too.”

Pelletier smiled. “Is that your order, sire?” He asked. “What about *Contre-Admiral* François Videzun and his crew?”

The Emperor paused a moment to consider. “I think that it’s time we went ahead with his wedding,” he said. “Once that’s done, he will be one of us – and loyal to the Family.”

He meant Family in the sense of the entire extended family. People brought into the nobility became loyal to the nobility; it was the source of their status. Given everything that Videzun had done for them, he deserved to be brought in – and marriage bonds, even a formal arranged marriage, were the strongest way of doing that.

“I still don’t think that that’s a...safe idea,” Pelletier admitted. “Princess Jasmine is ten now, too young yet for...”

“Carnal pleasures,” the Emperor said. “It doesn’t matter; Videzun will be entitled to affairs – as many as he wants – as long as he’s kind to her.”

Pelletier nodded. At the bottom, noble marriages were about bloodlines and status, not about things like love and attraction. Mistresses – or their rarer male equivalent – were common; only the Crown Prince had a restricted field. For a moment, Pelletier sympathised with the young man; he saw all of his young male friends having sex with everyone in sight – maids, Ladies, even married women – and he had none.

“I shall have *Contre-Admiral* François Videzun informed of his impending marriage,” he said formally. “Might I suggest creating him Baron *Charles de Gaulle*?”

The Emperor nodded. “A good thought,” he said. “See to working with General Leblanc. I want this war over with, as soon as possible.”

The news of his impending nuptials was supposed to be a surprise, even though some Ladies of the Court had been hinting at it for weeks, so *Contre-Admiral* François Videzun reacted as if he was surprised. The news – that he was to marry the Princess Jasmine – wasn’t unexpected, but he did his best to appear surprised. It was...harder than he had expected; if he had to marry someone, he would have preferred someone more...mature.

“My heartiest...congratulations,” Picard said, as soon as the messenger had gone. His face twisted itself into an evil grin. “I wish you the most fun for your wedding night. You’ll have to give her a cup of hot milk and read her a bedtime story.”

“Oh, shut up,” Videzun said, without heat. “I suppose it won’t be too bad.”

Picard became serious, perhaps recognising the seriousness of the situation. “You will become a high noble – a middle-ranking noble,” he said. “Your position at Court is confirmed.”

“A very good thing,” Videzun said. His tone darkened. “I can’t go to bed with her.”

“You don’t have to,” Picard assured him. They both shared a certain...horror at the thought of sleeping with an underage girl. “You’re just marrying into her family line.”

Videzun shrugged. Sorting out the confused lines of succession was...impossibly difficult. A woman inherited nothing – unless specifically willed to her – but she carried the family name, which was part of the vast and probably incestuous Royal Family. By now, Videzun suspected, Royal Blood was what the Emperor said it was – certainly a handful of really annoying nobles had suffered accidents from time to time.

Jacqueline Petal coughed, trying to attract attention. “The point is – the Emperor is going to seek a peace with the British,” she said. “If he does that...”

“The crew of the *George Washington* will have plenty of time to boost the United Empire forwards,” Videzun concluded. “We cannot end the war, not with Sealion in the works.”

“The Emperor opposes Sealion,” Picard said. His tone was artfully neutral. “We could take it to their Legislate, but that would...”

“Abandon surprise,” Videzun said. “Even in this crazy universe, Sealion” – he’d adapted the name more as a joke than anything else – “is only possible against a surprised opposition.”

“So...what do we do?” Jacqueline Petal asked. “It’s not as if we can accomplish it with just the *Charles de Gaulle*, is it?”

Videzun shook his head. “The Emperor...is not the only member of the inner line of succession,” he said. The Master of Protocol had been more than happy to provide a list. “There’s the Crown Prince.”

Jacqueline’s face twisted with distaste. “He tried to slip his hand inside the waistband of my trousers,” he said. “I had to twist away from him; you forbid us from starting fights. Admiral, that man is a menace to all the women and half of the manly men.”

Videzun shrugged. “If we asked him if he would like to claim power, before his father has more kids, what do you think he would say? Yes or no?”

“He’s a toad,” Jacqueline said. “Yes, he’ll take power – if you offered him half a

chance. Bastard should be turned into a toad, or a snake or a...”

“Thank you,” Videzun said dryly. “Unless you have developed magic powers” – he waited for her negative – “kindly think only about the possible.”

“Yes, Admiral,” Jacqueline said. “Sir, the Crown Prince cannot pull off a coup,” she said. “The Emperor is well defended.”

Videzun smiled coldly. “We’re better than they are,” he said. No matter how competent the Emperor’s guards were, they were very much products of TimeLine B’s technological capabilities. “I think that removing him will not be... difficult.”

“Poison him,” Jacqueline said. “I really don’t think that we want to be in the position of having to work with the Crown Prince alone, so use something to send the Emperor into a coma.”

“Understood,” Videzun said. “I’ll get Doctor Mimi Rouge to work on it at once.”

Court Phillipe Lavich had never been happier in his life, wondering what he had done before meeting her. Serving maids, even the occasional Lady of the Court, all of them paled next to Belen, who was...perfect.

The perfect companion, he thought, as he lay next to her in bed. She’d fallen asleep after making love, something that only made her more special to him. Many women seemed to want endless reassurance of his devotion afterwards; Belen just slept in his arms. There was little...soft about her perfect body; she had muscles and a willingness to use them.

“I love you,” he whispered, to her sleeping form, and kissed her gently on the forehead. Her body moved against him in her sleep, her breasts pushing up against his body. “I love you.”

Absently, he reached out and gently stroked a breast. She murmured in her sleep, pushing harder against him, as he reached down and felt between her legs. He wasn’t used to trying to give pleasure by anything, but sex, but she’d taught him. Watching as she lost control was truly...exciting.

“I love you too,” she breathed, as he stroked her. “I love you.”

Lavich studied her as she opened her eyes. “I didn’t mean to wake you,” he said softly. “I’m sorry...”

“Did I say I was complaining?” Belen asked, her body rolling over to climb on top of his. “I’ve got something for you too.”

Afterwards, they lay together, enjoying one another’s company. “I think that I don’t ever want to let go of you,” Lavich said seriously, playing with one perfect breast. “I think...”

Belen stuck out her tongue, aiming a mock-slap at him. “If you think I’m going to go to the toilet like this...”

That was what he liked about her; she never pretended to high status or servitude. She didn’t put on airs and graces, nor did she faint dead away – or fall to her knees – at the thought of being with him. “I didn’t mean like that,” he said. “Love...will you marry me?”

Ladies of the Court would have fainted, or pretended to faint, at the mere hint of the suggestion. Maids...knew better than to expect that they would ever be asked to marry a noble, no matter how much they tried to please him. They would have cried afterwards, if it ever came, for it would have been a joke.

Belen...said nothing. “I love you,” Lavich said seriously. “I’ll look after you, take care of you...you would have equal rights” – something he knew would be important to her – “and a say in my business.” He paused. “It’s as much yours as it is mine anyway.”

Belen smiled, and then rolled over, exposing her naked thighs. “I’m thinking about it,” she said, her voice deep and warm. Knowing that that mouth had performed delightful delights on his body only made the voice sexier to him. “I’ve thought about it.”

There was a long pause. “And...?” Lavich finally asked. The entire universe seemed to have frozen. “And?”

“I was always taught to make a man wait,” Belen said. She leaned forward **and kissed him hard. “But the answer is yes.”**

Interlude Three: Technology

Technology was the tool that allowed humanity – and the other races, including the Enemy – to examine the universe. As a cause of development, technology was very much in the forefront – but only if society allowed it to develop. In TimeLine A, the humans played fast and loose with their own security – simply by refusing to develop proper space travel until it was too late. In TimeLine B, technology had not quite frozen in place, as it had in Imperial China so long ago, but development was slowing.

Technology required competition to grow, and a social structure capable of supporting such competition without destruction. War provided an ideal impetus to develop one's weapons – for fear of the enemy developing a super weapon on their own – but at the same time it was intrinsically wasteful. War burnt off lives for little; with TimeLine B's geopolitics, none of the empires could really hope – realistically – to defeat, crush and occupy either of its rivals.

That had a second effect; the social systems were unable to change radically, even to the point of giving equal rights to women. Developing a viable contraceptive was possible, but what would have been the point? It wasn't as if society provided any roles for women, other than mothers, daughters and wives, with only a handful of exceptions. That alone disturbed technological evolution – it prevented half of the potential pioneers from developing their ideas. For Britain – and to some extent France – a female inventor would be treated with mild condescension. For Russia, she would be lucky if she was not stoned as a witch.

War...made social change possible.

War...offered positions to those who would never have had them.

War...forced people to examine old 'truths' for truth.

The ideal state of affairs for humanity, or so some entities had theorised and indeed come to believe – was that of endless non-violent competition. The ideal human state would respect the rights of its citizens, but also allow change to hit it regularly, affecting the overall structure without destroying it outright. Hitting the balance was difficult – most societies tended to move through periods of freedom and repression – but it had happened once.

Unfortunately, in the timeline that had been termed TimeLine B by those ignorant

of the others, it wasn't moving fast enough.

The second figure spoke first. "Have they discovered the truth of it all?" She asked. Her voice...wasn't quite as unconcerned as it sounded. "There are disturbances up and down the timeline."

The first figure knew that she didn't mean humans. "Uncertain," he said. "It is so hard to be certain."

The second figure drifted over to him. "They might be here," she said. "If they are interfering as well..."

"It would set up an interference pattern," the first figure said. "Humans are such unpredictable creatures..."

"*We* are human," the second figure reminded him.

"We *were* human by their definition," the first figure said. "The effects caused have been caused by humans."

The figures paused for a long moment. They were supremely intelligent, either of them capable of outthinking any human on computer on Timeline B – or Timeline A. To admit that there were effects that they could not predict – creatures that could start a game of snooker and win on the first action – was to admit to a certain kind of defeat.

"And they have clues that one of our agents is active on the *George Washington*," the first figure said. He ignored his companion's shock. "Should we allow them to find the agent, or rewrite history to ensure that we remain undetected?"

The second figure said nothing for a long moment. "How could they have detected one of our agents?" She asked. A thought struck her. "You did it."

The first figure nodded, if such a simple word could be applied. "It's not enough," he said. "They're...not ready."

"And you think that if they find one of our agents, they will be somehow magically prepared for what's coming?" The second figure asked. "If only we could interfere directly..."

“We cannot,” the first figure said. “We can only watch, wait...and then intervene very slightly.”

The second figure nodded. “A full series of information has been prepared,” she said, after a long moment. “Observe.”

She passed it over. “Acceptable,” the first figure said. “Download it into the agent’s brain, and then we’ll see what happens...”

Chapter Thirty: Russian Roulette

Iron Palace

Moscow, Russia (TimeLine B)

There had been, apparently, forty-nine Tsars between 1777 and 2009. The job simply didn't have high life expectancy; the average was five years. The current Tsar had been unusually long-lived, mainly – Petrovich suspected – through sheer bloody-mindedness.

It hadn't taken long for him to work out how the Russian Court functioned. The children of prominent nobles, from boyars to dukes, were kept at Court, mainly as hostages for their parents' good behaviour. The Tsarist Secret Service kept tabs on everyone of importance, from rebel leaders to professors to nobles. No one was safe if the Tsar decided he wanted to ruin him; the army answered to him alone.

Consequently, everyone plotted and schemed against the Tsar, using methods from outright revolution – which was harshly punished – to poison. The nobles who led armed rebellions were often cut down by their own peasants, just to prevent the entire region from being destroyed. A successful poisoning, on the other hand, could lead to the murderer becoming Tsar, assuming he survived the challengers. Many Tsars had fallen to their own sons; the line was shattered and broken and had been so for years.

Rebecca had been helpful in helping him to figure out the rules. A Jew could never rule in Russia, so ironically they were used by the nobles as servants, while the peasants hated and feared them. Rebecca and her father were only safe within the Iron Palace, which didn't have the decency to look like the Kremlin. Petrovich suspected that it was worse for the Americans and French who'd arrived in the new reality; he'd been not that familiar with Moscow before being dumped in the new reality.

"We have managed to activate seventeen of the Abrams," Captain Yakov said. The former commander of a Russian tank force, Captain Yakov had been lucky to survive the cold; Petrovich needed him desperately. "Three more had bombs within the logic structure of their computers."

Petrovich nodded. He'd expected as much; after all the exaggerated horror stories about Vietcong soldiers using American weapons, the Americans had been

determined to prevent others stealing and using their systems. At the same time, any long start-up sequence would have made the tanks...useless, under certain circumstances.

“And so they’re useless,” he said thoughtfully. The Americans had not been very helpful; only thirty Abrams and several hundred rounds. “What about the other ten?”

“We’re working on that now,” Captain Yakov said. “The three aren’t *useless*, sir; they can still be used for spare parts.”

“Do we happen to have anyone who understands how American tanks go together?” Petrovich asked. “Once they’re gone, they’re gone!”

Captain Yakov smiled grimly. “Comrade Engineer Grigorovich has been unable to get them to build shells for the tanks?”

Petrovich smiled. It had been a long time since anyone in the former Soviet Union – except at Communist Party meetings – had been addressed as ‘Comrade.’ “They don’t have anything like a capable industrial sector,” he said. He’d been working on building tanks for Tsar Nicolas XX, using the plans stolen from the French who’d stolen them from the British, but the task was harder than he’d expected – fortunately not harder than he’d led the Tsar to believe.

“They’re working on the dumb assembly line principle,” he said, which he conceded made a certain type of sense. “Each of their working men builds one part – and one of their tradesmen builds the tanks from the parts, or rather...”

“Builds the trucks,” Captain Yakov said. “Adapting them to build tanks is...trickier.”

Petrovich nodded absently. The peasants who had been conscripted to work in the factories only knew one tiny part of the entire unit; be it lorry, tank, ship, submarine or whatever. Imagination and initiative was alien to them; it kept them from considering other matters, such as how much better the world would be if they revolted.

“We have to do it, though,” he said. “Satisfying our master is everything.”

Captain Yakov nodded. There were good things about being in Imperial Russia, from the women who they could have at any time if they wanted them, to the

massive riches and power they could claim. The downside, however, was that all of those could be withdrawn – or worse – at the behest of the Tsar.

Ah, but does he know how they can be used to overthrow him? Petrovich asked himself, and shivered. He was damned if he was going to grovel forever in front of the Tsar, but the thought of what would happen if he tried – and failed – to overthrow him was chilling.

“I wish,” Captain Yakov began, and then broke off. Petrovich understood; he would have sold his soul for a genuine FSB – or even KGB – agent to help them, assuming that such a person could be trusted. The Tsar’s Secret Service knew little of electronic bugs, but he wouldn’t have bet against them having learnt the idea from examining the ships.

Of course, until they invent transistors, they won’t get very far, he thought. He’d kept his rooms bare for a reason; it would be harder to emplace one of the primitive bugs of this world in position. Rebecca understood – he’d explained to her as best as he could – and she’d helped.

He smiled. She’d helped with rather a lot, actually, including reconciling him to this situation.

“It’s ok,” he said. “This room is swept for bugs regularly.”

Captain Yakov nodded. “It doesn’t seem to have occurred to him to have ordered people to leave the bugs alone,” he said. “Assuming they have any worth mentioning.”

Petrovich shrugged. Even Stalin hadn’t gone that far; he would have faced revolts with politicians who would have preferred their nightly habits to have remained a secret. In this shadow world, with wooden fires and flickering medieval torches, he wouldn’t have seen them caring – he’d seen the Tsar rape a serving maid in front of a group.

It’s a deception, he thought suddenly, and understood. The Tsar acted the barbarian because he had to appear the barbarian, just to keep control. They refused to appear sophisticated because they linked sophistication with the Jews and the French, their blood enemies.

“Engineer Grigorovich has been working on developing their industrial base and new weapons,” Petrovich said, changing the subject. “Once we have a few

regiments armed with the new weapons, then we can take action.”

Captain Yakov nodded slowly. Only two hundred of Petrovich’s men had survived the exposure, and they were far too valuable to risk using to fight, even with the advanced American weapons. The Tsar kept them separated, although Petrovich expected that, sooner or later, they’d be able to work together anyway.

“Action,” he said, and then Rebecca raced into the room. Her blonde face, so cold outside of bed, was scared.

“Master, my father has come to see you on behalf of his master,” she said, falling to her knees. When there was any company, she always acted the submissive slave. He waits for you now in the guest room.”

“Thank you,” Petrovich said. He nodded to Captain Yakov. “Excuse me,” he said, and slipped into the guest room, such as it was. “Yes?”

“The Tsar demands your presence,” Stefan said. In six months, Petrovich had never been able to determine if he had a surname. “He waits for you now in the minor throne room.”

Petrovich nearly swore before catching himself. “I come,” he said, and followed Stefan out of the room. The stone corridors seemed colder than usual and there were fewer people around; it was one of the harvest seasons and many of the boyars had gone to their farms.

“He waits inside,” Stefan said, and left Petrovich in front of the massive iron doors. The guards searched him roughly, and then opened the doors. Petrovich prostrated himself as soon as he saw the massive form of the Tsar, and then crawled towards him.

“You may rise,” the Tsar said, without preamble. “Slave; report.”

Petrovich flushed, before realising that the Tsar was talking to another court Jew – a nervous-looking woman who had never been named in front of him. She kept her eyes low, like a woman who’d been repeatedly traumatised. Petrovich was surprised that she could still walk, let alone talk.

“The British have managed to punch through the defence lines in New Spain, which has not been yet brought into the Empire,” she said, in a dull monotone. Petrovich had never been able to identify her accent; he suspected that it didn’t

exist within his timeline. “They have managed to progress nearly fifty miles, my lord, and they have inflicted heavy casualties.”

Petrovich was impressed. He fought not to show it. In this world, which was a perverse version of World War One, it took a minor *miracle* to advance *five* miles, let alone fifty. With tanks and enough power, it was possible - which meant that the British had finally played one of the cards that had come through the...event that had brought him to this world.

“In addition, they have managed to use carrier-borne aircraft to attack the French fleet,” she said. The Tsar stared at her, holding her unwilling eyes. “They have inflicted heavy damage.”

She lowered a massive sheaf of papers to the floor, lowering her eyes again. “My master?”

The Tsar waved to Petrovich to take the papers from his kneeling position. “Wait for me in the antechamber,” the tsar ordered her. Petrovich saw her flinch as she left the room. “My Lord Colonel?”

The Tsar’s tone was warm ice, with little friendship or respect. He’d created Petrovich a Lord – none of the nobles would have dreamed of lowering themselves to listen to a commoner – but Petrovich knew that the Tsar could tear down even the Grand Duke.

“The British have clearly managed to put tanks into production,” he said, stating the obvious. “With such an advantage, they have managed to take large areas of ground.”

“And the French could do the same to us?” The Tsar asked. “The Throne is vulnerable?”

Petrovich hesitated, keeping his face blank. “It’s a possibility,” he conceded. It was more than *just* a possibility, and he knew it. “If they have managed to build tanks of their own...”

“And you have delayed the process,” the Tsar accused. “You insisted on working to different plans...”

Petrovich winced as the Tsar ranted on, more than a little unfairly. He’d expected that the British and French would develop tanks, which meant that the simplest

thing to do was to develop anti-tank tanks. The Tsar had...disagreed, along with half of the boyars, and the argument had gone nowhere quickly.

“We have some tanks ready for use now,” he said, trying to defuse an explosion. “If we were to...”

“Then we can attack the French now,” the Tsar said. His voice showed no trace of concern over the deaths that that would cause. “Hit them hard; keep hitting them, and then we can hammer our way all the way to Paris.”

Petrovich took a breath, wishing that he could speak freely. “Your Splendid Majesty,” he said, “that would be unwise...”

“Oh?” The Tsar asked. “How so?”

Petrovich made a mental promise that he would never say anything rude about Stalin again. “Your Splendid Majesty, tanks have to be used in large numbers for success,” he said. One thing he was sure of; the French had better aircraft, even without the *Charles de Gaulle*. “If we send only a handful into battle, even with the seventeen currently working alternate American tanks, we will lose the battle and the advantage of surprise.”

The Tsar stared at him for a long moment, his bearded face expressionless. “I have been assured by the Generals in command that the French will run as soon as they see one of our tanks,” he said. “It happened in your world...did it not?”

Contradicting the Tsar didn’t lead to a long life. “Your Splendid Majesty, the troops who fled knew nothing about tanks, or their weaknesses,” he said. “The French will know about tanks, and as long as they don’t panic...”

“My technical experts” – people who couldn’t have built something from TimeLine B – “assure me that the...Abrams tanks are immune to our weapons,” the Tsar interrupted. “If we just send them at the French lines, we will break through.”

Petrovich thought furiously. How to explain it? “Your Splendid Majesty, if we do that, we will run out of weapons for the tanks,” he said. “We do not have the ability to duplicate the fuel they need, so when we run out of fuel, we will lose the ability to move them. Your Splendid Majesty, the tanks are invincible...until they run out of weapons or fuel.”

He paused. "And there is a second problem, Your Splendid Majesty," he said. The Tsar's face clenched, but he didn't react. "The people from the...other timeline, my world, will not be awed by the tanks. Once they see them...well, they will know what they have to do to defeat them, and then the advantage of surprise will be gone forever."

"I will not slip behind the other two empires in using the new knowledge," the Tsar said. "Russia will become master of the world and I will be her master!"

He's mad, Petrovich thought. "Your Splendid Majesty, Rome wasn't built in a day," Petrovich said. "Taking the entire world will be...difficult."

"So," the Tsar purred. "What do you suggest that we do?"

Petrovich considered. "The French will be preparing to attack us," he said. The Secret Service had been very clear on this. "If we prepare a reception for their tanks, using the American tanks, then we can destroy the attack force and utterly demoralise them."

"Then we can strike against them ourselves," the Tsar said.

"And crush whatever forces they have risen up to prepare for their so-called successful attack," Petrovich said. "They'll sue for peace then."

The Tsar muttered an oath. "I want to burn Paris," he said. "What else matters beside that?"

Petrovich, as soon as he had humbled himself before the Tsar again, left the Throne Room as quickly as he could, moving through the corridors. He never saw the knife that came at him, only the glint on its blade. He ducked on instinct, dodging the blade, before grabbing his pistol on his belt.

"Die," he shouted, and fired down the dark tunnel. He missed; he must have missed, for the sound of running feet continued to torment him. He fired again, hitting something; he heard a gasp in the darkness. He cursed gently, and then pulled his torch from his belt, shining a brilliant white light down the corridor. A man, dressed in a dark cloak, was trying to escape.

"You'll never make it," Petrovich said, moving carefully towards him. A knife

was a nice weapon, but he would have expected a pistol shot. It dawned upon him that there had been no running guards; where were they? “Give up?”

The man swore in a language Petrovich didn’t recognise. Only the vitriol was comprehensible. “I’ll never talk,” he said, and started to choke.

“What the hell?” Petrovich swore, forgetting his own safety. The man was choking to death, dying even under his eyes. He swung the body around; the dark-bearded face was that of a stranger. “Who the hell sent you?”

The figure gave a final choke and died. Petrovich shivered, sniffing the traces of a poison from the figure’s mouth, and checked his pockets. They were empty; there were no clues at all. The clothes under the cloak were standard court garb; the assassin was one of a hundred thousand nobles, clearly.

“Bastards,” Petrovich snapped, as he realised that there were still no guards. Someone must have spread a lot of money around for a bungled assignation attempt. Moving quickly and carefully, he pulled the dead man’s cloak on and slipped away down the corridor, turning corners as if there was an assassin behind every one.

He reached his rooms and lifted his pistol. It was the last place where he could be ambushed, but there was no one in the corridor, not even a guard. For the first time, he regretted the Tsar’s decision that he no longer needed a guard on his rooms. As quietly as he could, he moved up to the door – and slipped inside.

“Don’t move,” he snapped, at a shadow, and regretted it as Rebecca stared at him in horror. For a long moment, they faced each other, and then Petrovich slammed the door shut and locked it.

“Is there anyone else here?” He demanded. “Are you alone?”

Rebecca stared at him, her eyes bright. “Yes,” she stammered. He’d never done anything like this to her before. “Master...”

“It’s ok,” he said, trying to reassure her. He lowered the gun, returning it to its holster. “Someone just tried to kill me.”

Her face, if possible, paled still further. If he died, she would be sent to a whorehouse and used by soldiers. “But who?” She asked, her voice still shaky. “Who would want you dead?”

Petrovich laughed aloud as he entered his main room. It was cold, but he had at least managed to convince her to allow it to warm up. "The boyars in charge of industry, before I came," he said. "The nobles who object to such a newcomer getting such power under the Tsar. The French or the British, assuming they know about me. The Tsar's heir, perhaps; he fears my influence. The Tsar himself..."

He smiled at her expression. "Shall I go on?" He asked bitterly. "Well?"

She shook her head slowly. "No, my master," she said. Her use of the formal words was enough to convince him that she was still scared. "My master...?"

"Don't worry," Petrovich said, trying to reassure her. "I have no doubt that whoever launched the attack will reveal themselves before too long."

He caught her and pulled her over to him. She didn't resist, which was worrying. "It'll all be fine," he promised, and began to make love to her.

Chapter Thirty-One: The Watch on the Rhine

Franco-Russian Border

Europe (TimeLine B)

Ironically, to pilot Andre Arsenault, the border between the Russian and French Empires in TimeLine B ran along the German-Polish border of TimeLine A, although with a regularity that was deceptive on a map. The French and the Russians, back during the Global War, had simply drawn a line across Europe; consigning Prussia and Poland to the ash can of history. Even though the Balkans had been divided up later, they remained stable and peaceful – until now.

The helicopter drifted east, remaining low. Arsenault wasn't sure what to make of their new world, but one thing was clear; France was under attack. They'd learnt enough about the Russians, in both timelines, to know that they didn't want to live under them – whatever the cost. Without nuclear weapons, the Russians might just manage to score a victory in the end, even at high cost.

Arsenault and his wingmen, the crew of the five land-attack helicopters that had been loaded on board, just before departing from France, had been preparing to attack Chinese targets. Russian targets were much simpler; they had trenches across the land. The helicopters were to remain out of contact, unless the Russians deployed tanks of their own – and the French tanks, or land ironclads as they were being called here, were unable to handle them.

Arsenault smiled as the helicopters came to rest in a pre-prepared airfield, only twenty miles from the front. One of their number - Belen Lefunte – was getting hitched; to an alternate, to be sure! He smiled at the thought; who would have thought that *she* would get married? Naturally, he himself had enjoyed himself with some women from the new world, but he rather wished that he were back home. Some of the women in the new France were...strange, others were delightful.

He tapped his radio once. In theory, there was nothing in the region that could have picked up the low-powered signals, but he was professional enough to know better than to assume anything. There might have been no hints of American activity, but who knew what the Russians might have?

"This is Aleph-one," he said, into his radio. He spoke in a whisper, something that

was unnecessary, but the sheer seriousness of the situation seemed to dictate it. “We have taken up position.”

There was a long pause. Arsenault was starting to worry when the reply came. “This is Napoleon,” the voice said. Napoleon; the codename for General Leblanc – and also a name that had been passed through the Imperial Family, ever since Prime Minister Napoleon. “You are on station?”

“Yes,” Arsenault said, refusing to admit to annoyance. It made some sense – navigation was something of a hit or miss concept in the alternate world – but it was annoying. It suggested that he was incompetent. “Yes, sir; we are in the correct location.”

“Excellent,” General Leblanc said. If he sensed Arsenault’s annoyance, he didn’t allow it to appear in his voice. “Remain where you are. If you are needed, you will be called.”

Arsenault sighed. “Yes, sir,” he said. If the Admiral had decided to commit some help from the *Charles de Gaulle*, as was clearly the case, then why not commit everything? “Yes, sir,” he said.

Ten miles to the east, the land was covered with guns, preparing to fire a hail of shells on the Russian positions. The sheer size of the battleground meant that the two forces contested daily for a massive stretch of ground, fighting in the mud, but there were fewer trenches than Lieutenant Lagrange – former communication officer – would have expected. The battleground was simply too vast to make them useful.

“Your helicopters seem eager to get into the battle,” General Leblanc observed. Lieutenant Lagrange said nothing. “Indeed, it sounded as if they didn’t want to remain where they were, eh?”

Lieutenant Lagrange realised that he was supposed to say something. General Leblanc reminded him far too much of a political general from before the National Front; someone who projected *élan*, but little competence. *Contre-Admiral* François Videzun might swear that General Leblanc knew what he was doing, but Lagrange wasn’t so sure.

“They have been cooped up on the ship,” he said neutrally. He wasn’t going to

argue, not now. “They want some action.”

General Leblanc slapped him on the back. “Don’t worry,” he boomed. “They’ll see some today, boy.”

“Of course,” Lagrange said. They passed a line of tanks – *no, land ironclads*, he reminded himself - and General Leblanc paused to examine them thoughtfully. Despite himself, Lagrange had to admit that the general had done good work with the plans he’d had; the two types of land ironclad were ready to move.

“Impressive, are they not?” General Leblanc asked. Lagrange nodded. “One type for clearing trenches, one type for taking on other ironclads, just like them.”

Lagrange smiled. He would have bet a free trip home to his original France that the Russians at least knew what was coming their way. No matter their deficiencies in technology, the Russians had thousands of spies within the Paris Court. It had *astounded* when he’d worked that out; none of the Court seemed to care!

“And we owe it all to you,” General Leblanc said, when Lagrange said nothing. “Thank you, young man.”

“You’re welcome,” Lagrange said. “Tell me; when do we begin the attack?”

General Leblanc checked his watch. “How about now?” He asked. “It’s something around the planned launch time anyway, eh?”

Lagrange fought to control his expression and didn’t quite succeed. “Don’t worry,” General Leblanc said, suddenly amused. “What can possibly go wrong?” He lifted a flare pistol into the air, then paused. “Would you like the honours?”

“No, thank you,” Lagrange said.

General Leblanc lifted the pistol and fired the first flare into the air. “The offensive begins,” he said, as the guns started to fire. “The Russians won’t know what’s hit them!”

The Tsar had been very determined about one thing; Lord Colonel Ivan Petrovich was not to be allowed near the front. Captain Yakov wasn’t certain if that had

been intended out of concern for Petrovich's life, or for concerns that Petrovich might take the opportunity to desert the Tsar. It didn't matter; all that mattered was that Captain Yakov held command of the alternate force – ten American-built Abrams tanks. A second force was held in reserve, awaiting their chance.

A thunderous crash announced the arrival of the first wave of shells. Absently, Captain Yakov timed the attacks and shook his head; assuming that all the French guns were firing as one, then they were firing...CRASH...ten shells a minute. Captain Yakov dismissed that thought; he wasn't convinced that that would have been possible even in their own timeline.

"They have begun the attack," General Razov announced, to general approval. Captain Yakov bit down on the remark that hovered around his lips; as a statement of the obvious it could hardly be bettered. General Razov's headquarters, a manor that had once belonged to a Polish nobleman, wasn't the right type of place to conduct an attack – or a defence – from.

He paused as the servants filed in, carrying glasses of mulled wine. The servants, all young female Poles, seemed to fit in with the luxurious room – in stark contrast to the suffering inflicted upon the young men of the army. Captain Yakov sighed; did the Tsar pick incompetents to run the army, people too stupid to pose a threat to him?

"You are correct, my lord," another general said. Captain Yakov hadn't even bothered to learn his name; with features like that his father had clearly had a deeper relation with his mother than most families could have stood. "They have begun their attack."

General Razov took his glass of wine and examined the map. A whole team of staff officers – they didn't get any wine, of course – constantly updated it, running backwards and forwards through the corridors because General Razov hadn't allowed them to establish a radio station anywhere near his rooms. Captain Yakov peered over his shoulder; a powerful French attack was developing near the Alexander Line.

"They're going to break the line," he observed. General Razov looked at him as if he was utterly uppity. "That, of course, is the plan."

"They'll break my line?" The unnamed general demanded. "Send in your tanks at once, scum!"

All of the money in the world could not have made Captain Yakov go on bended knee to that general. “If we counter-attack now,” he said, as patiently as he could, “they will know that we are here.”

He tapped the map, tracing an angle of attack. “Order your men to fall back,” he said, heedless of the fact he was issuing orders to a superior officer. “If the enemy see them running, they’ll commit more to the break.”

“Russian troops do not retreat, *Captain* Yakov,” General Razov snapped. “They will stop the enemy, or die trying.”

“They’ll die for nothing,” Captain Yakov said, trying to convince them. Did they care nothing for their men? “Sir, if they remain there, they’ll be killed and overrun and...”

“Silence,” General Razov snapped. “You will obey orders, Captain Yakov; you may move to engage them at when you feel the best moment is. Until then, you will carry out your orders.”

His tone wasn’t angry, or hysterical...merely dismissive. Captain Yakov bit down on his harsh response, saluted, and left the room. He had intended to conduct the attack in person, after all. As he left the manor, he looked back and smiled grimly.

“A single French shell would improve our war-fighting skills enormously,” he muttered to himself, and hurried to his small force of hidden American tanks. It would be good, for a while, to get back to the wonders of modern technology – even modern American technology.

The land ironclads moved forward, cracking trench after trench of the Alexander Line. From his command post, General Leblanc listened to reports from the runners and the fragmented radio transmissions from command vehicles. The attack seemed to be proceeding successfully – too successfully.

“We should be meeting heavier resistance by now,” he muttered. Had they managed to crack the lines at the weakest point? It seemed too good to be true. “Where are their reinforcements?”

“I have no idea,” Lagrange said softly. General Leblanc scowled. “Perhaps they don’t have any?”

“They must have some,” General Leblanc snapped. “Russia has an almost unlimited supply of Russian bastards. They trade them for land like nobody’s business. It’s standard procedure, for them as well as us, to reinforce a weak point at once – so where are their reserves?”

“I don’t know,” Lagrange admitted. He leaned closer to the map. “What about aerial scouts? Perhaps one of the helicopters could scout...?”

“Too much chance of losing them,” General Leblanc commented. He glared across at a radioman. “The fighters have reported nothing?”

“They’re smashing the Russians in the sky, they don’t have the new planes,” the radioman shouted, his delight evident in his voice. “Sir, they’re slashing them down like thresh...”

“And have they seen anything on the ground?” General Leblanc demanded. “No sign of reinforcements?”

“None, sir,” the radioman said. “Shall I order them to look again?”

“Yes,” General Leblanc said, after a moment’s thought. “Order them to search the entire region.”

Lagrange frowned. “They might have managed to camouflage their reinforcements,” he muttered. “Order them to pay particular attention to woods or places that could hide them.”

“Do so,” General Leblanc ordered. “Where the hell are they?”

The Abrams main computer, a new American system, was crippled, just to prevent it noticing that the crew were not Americans. Captain Yakov found it relaxing; it was good and honest, unlike the command post. Being with his people, the most effective fighting force in Russia, was far more relaxing than dealing with General Razov and his ilk.

“Sir, they’re advancing over the field,” a runner called. Captain Yakov worked on the map, scowling. The Russians of this timeline, for reasons known only to a long-assassinated Tsar, had thoughtfully created a massive collective farm near the border, a massive collection of fields that had been burnt off long since, when

the war was new. The trenches had been built at one end of the fields; their force was at the other.

“Let’s see,” Captain Yakov said, peering through his binoculars into the distance. A dozen – two dozen – large boxy shapes were making their way east, occasionally spraying a burst of machine gun fire into the trenches. “Ah...look at them go.”

His driver, one of the crew from the *Stalingrad*, smiled evilly. “Amateurs,” he said. “Look at them come.”

Captain Yakov nodded. “Get ready to move,” he snapped into his tactical radio. If there was an American drone nearby the secret had been blown, but he was confident that there wasn’t one nearby. “Stand by...”

He counted off the moments. “Fire!”

Francis Hedrick, one of a handful of Germans in the armed forces of the French Empire, had gone into the land ironclads as soon as he'd heard that they existed. After years fighting colonial wars, and then the bloody slaughters on the eastern front, he knew that he wanted to have something with lots of weapons near him when he fought again.

He carefully muttered orders as the tanks started to cross the field. The farmer’s son in him groaned at the damage; the fields had been burnt to the ground during the first days of the war, when everyone had thought that it would be over soon. It wasn’t as if he had to do much; follow the assault tanks and engage enemy tanks if they put in an appearance. He didn’t expect to have to do much...

BOOM! The lead tank exploded. Hedrick gaped at the tank as it went through a series of explosions, finally shattering under the impact of...something. He stared, unable to believe his eyes, as seven of the assault tanks met their deaths in the same manner; he could hardly see the guns firing at them.

“The woods,” his driver shouted. Hedrick blinked; there hadn’t been a wood there last time the French Army had been nearby, had there? He couldn’t remember. In the wood, strange flashes could be seen...and land ironclads died.

“Fire into the woods,” he snapped, and his gunner obeyed. The massive main gun

was supposed to be able to stop any land ironclad, but the explosions didn't seem to bother whatever was shooting at them at all. Then he saw it...a massive land ironclad, bursting out of the burning woods without slowing, moving at an impossible speed. Its gun moved rapidly around, sighting in on an assault tank – and fired.

“*Merde*,” Hedrick muttered, as the tank exploded. “Fire!”

His tank shook once as it fired a massive shell at the new land ironclad. The shell struck it dead on and he cheered...and then saw that the ironclad was undamaged. Its turret swept on, locked onto Hedrick's tank...and then there was a burst of burning heat and he felt nothing ever again.

“Those are American tanks,” Lagrange realised in horror. “Sir, they must have been dumped somewhere in Russia.”

He scowled, thinking of poor American soldiers, trapped in a Russia that was far darker than anything that had existed in their world, and shivered. The reports were clear; any land ironclad that went near the American tanks was dead.

“So what do we do about them?” General Leblanc demanded. “A pilot bombed one, and it failed to dent it!”

“Call in the helicopters,” Lagrange snapped. “They have anti-tank weapons; tell them to use them!”

General Leblanc scowled. “Those weapons are not meant to be wasted,” he protested. All of the arrogance seemed to have fallen out of him. “Lagrange...”

“The front is about to collapse,” Lagrange snapped. “Use the weapons!”

“Should have known that the Americans were not to be trusted,” Arsenault snarled, as the reports came in. “We're on our way.”

He checked the tactical net, relying on his co-pilot to handle the main flight. The problem, of course, was that the battlefield simply wasn't designed to handle their aircraft, let alone all the complexities of a TimeLine A battlefield. There could be

anti-aircraft guns underneath, preparing to engage him...and he wouldn't know until they flew over them.

"Stay high," he muttered. "If they have radar-guided weapons, we're dead anyway."

He took the opportunity to transmit back to the *Charles de Gaulle*. If the enemy had American tanks – and seeing that there had only been American tanks involved in the task force – they might have other American weapons as well. His mind raced endlessly, trying to decide what might or might not have fallen into Russian hands.

The helicopter spun suddenly and he cursed. A black puff of smoke erupted near them, an attempt to shoot them down. He checked the radar, wondering if there would be any jet fighters in the air, but there were only propeller-driven aircraft.

Unless they're American stealth aircraft, he thought, and shuddered. He checked the location beacon, and then checked the metal sensors, looking for something out of place. He found it and peered down as the helicopters swooped past, high overhead.

"There," he muttered. Seven tanks – American Abrams – were moving west slowly, followed by thousands of Russian infantrymen. The wreckage of French tanks lay all around them, telling the tale of thousands of dead men.

"Engage?" One of the other pilots asked. "Now?"

"Follow me," he snapped, and took control of the aircraft. Without waiting, he swooped down on the tanks, careful to avoid their main guns. A helicopter *had* been downed by a main gun once, though sheer luck, and no one wanted to repeat *that* little blunder. He tapped the weapons system, bringing up antitank missiles... and then he fired four of them at two Abrams. The missiles slammed into the tank...destroying it.

"Take out the others," he snapped, into his radio, as bullets started flying through the air. That proved one thing; whoever was crewing those tanks wasn't American. An American crew would have been almost linked into the tank's systems, using its computers for targeting. Two helicopters fell and exploded on the ground, but the tanks were retreating.

"Take them, take them now," one of his pilots demanded. Arsenault shook his head – the last thing they needed was to risk more irreplaceable planes.

"No," he said. "All units, return to base."

He scowled; the battle had suddenly returned to a stalemate, almost completely. As he flew back, one thought dominated his mind. *What now?*

Chapter Thirty-Two: Peace in Our Time?

Ten Downing Street

London, United Kingdom (TimeLine B)

Victory wasn't a new sensation to the people of Britain, but a victory on the scale of New Spain was something new. Street parties had appeared spontaneously, from crowds of people dancing in the streets to massive garden parties, and the churches were full of people celebrating the victory.

From his vantage point, high above Downing Street, Prime Minister Lord Harriman Grey watched as some of the policemen guarding the gates were drawn into the dance. He allowed himself a relaxed and permissive smile; they deserved some time to enjoy themselves as well. A Prime Minister, at least one who wanted to *remain* Prime Minister, couldn't take more than a day or two off at any time.

There were only four people in the room; himself, Admiral Sir Martin Benson, General Sir Douglas Highlander and Prime Minister Lord Roger Adams, of the North American Union. The presence of the American Prime Minister was unusual; normally America's interests would be represented by their representative, rather than their leader. The changes in the power balance recently had affected everything – nothing was as it was.

For the first time since the *George Washington* had appeared, Harriman Grey wondered if it had been a good thing – or if the way would have been...better without it.

"The advance has slowed, but victory is in sight," Adams said. "Otherwise I would not be here."

"That is understood," Grey said. His tone was ironic; normally they would only meet during the annual Imperial Conferences. "And Panama Harbour?"

Adams smiled; Grey understood the joke. The TimeLine A people – and who had chosen that term, he wondered – had suffered an attack on their navy under similar circumstances. That had its own worries; the crew of the French ship would certainly be aware of that, even if they hadn't thought of trying their own before Panama.

“A success, as far as we can tell,” Adams said. “We certainly knocked hell out of them, and they haven’t attempted to prevent us from reinforcing the forces that have landed on Cuba and the other islands. We tried to tempt them into leaving harbour with a handful of superdreadnaughts, with the carriers waiting in the background and...”

“And?” Grey asked. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” Adams said. “They didn’t come out to fight, or to challenge us. They’re maintaining a far more powerful Combat Air Patrol over Panama and the other harbours, but they’ve been keeping back otherwise. Which is...interesting.”

Admiral Sir Martin Benson spoke with a certain grim tone. “And so the naval balance of power is destroyed once again,” he said. His tone darkened. “You do realise, of course, that there is nothing preventing them from doing this to us?”

Grey looked up sharply. “I thought that you said that full precautions would be taken,” he snapped. “Why can’t it be stopped?”

Benson sighed. “The enemy can remain unnoticed until they come within radar range,” he said. “All they have to do is slip out of the Mediterranean Sea, and then they’re pretty much lost until we see them again. The...*American* AWACS has a far more powerful radar than we have anywhere else, but...”

His tone altered. “They can sneak up on the Royal Navy and launch at short range,” he said. “When we see them, we’ll have to get our own aircraft into the air – we’re running constant patrols now – and fight back. The attack could come at any moment and...”

“I see,” Grey said. “The only thing we can do, then, is boost the number of patrols.”

“And call Royal Flying Corps units from the defence of London,” Benson said. “We need more aircraft than we have, even with the catch-up project. Most of our aircraft production, particularly of the newer types, took part in the North American Union.”

Grey sighed. “Politically impossible,” he said flatly. “If we run down the air defences of London, you can take it to the bank that Parliament would have fits. The last thing they need is unrest; the Public has a long memory. The same goes for anywhere along the east coast; anywhere the French can hit with their new

improved bombers.”

There was a long grim silence. The French hadn’t concentrated so much on naval technology; they’d concentrated on aircraft. Some of them had been failures; the bombers that had lashed out at London were not. They’d also taken a risk with their tank designs, but Grey had to admit that it had paid off handsomely. Simply by producing the anti-tank design first, they’d managed to limit the damage that the NAU soldiers had handed out to them.

“There is also the danger of what’s happened in Russia,” Grey said. “You saw the photographs from our friends in Paris.”

General Sir Douglas Highlander scowled. “Invincible tanks, at least to anything we have,” he said. “Sir, if they get over here…”

“We’d be in serious trouble,” Grey agreed. “The question, of course, is simple; what else has fallen into Russian hands?”

Adams hesitated. “The best person to ask about this would be the Admiral himself, Admiral Jackson,” he said. “While we do have a list of what was in the force – both the warships and their transports – it’s impossible to tell what else might have appeared. It could be anything.”

“Or anyone,” Grey said. “I trust you read the paper by Professor Broklehurst?”

Adams nodded. “Yes,” he said. “The Viceroy showed it to me under strict secrecy.”

“One of the…Atomic hell-weapons is possible,” Grey said flatly. “That rather cancels any thoughts about the laws of science somehow being different here.”

“So the slight fluctuations within the *Washington’s* power core was caused by whatever brought them here,” General Sir Douglas Highlander commented. “What does this mean for us?”

Grey stared out of the window for a long moment. “If the good professor was correct, achieving an atomic bomb is within the technology we have now – not from what we have gotten from them. In hindsight, it’s clear; we could have developed it from any time since 1920. We just…never looked down that path.” He paused. “And, my friends, what’s true for us is true for the French as well.”

Adams cursed. “That means...”

“That the French could build such weapons,” Grey said. “Can you imagine the hell on earth? My God; the *Russians* could build such weapons!”

Adams shook his head. “No one would use them,” he said. “The damage would be too great.”

General Sir Douglas Highlander spoke with a cold grim tone. Echoes of the grave floated within his voice. “The last month, a village in lower Manchuria revolted against the Tsar’s forces,” he said. “The Tsar had been squeezing them dry, you see. On his *personal* orders, his people...cleansed the village.” He tapped the map. “The Russians are trying to...exterminate the Chinese.”

Benson scowled. “A weapon like that could destroy the harbours in the Orkneys,” he said. His tone was almost dead. “The Navy would be destroyed in a flash. We cannot let them have such a weapon.”

“I would prefer not to have it either,” Grey admitted. “For the last year, total victory has been a pipedream” – he held up a hand – “we might as well admit it. Now...we have the tools to make a victory, but at what cost?”

He looked out of the window, without facing them. “In the last two centuries, each of the three empires has been unbeatable,” he said. “The French could not be defeated by the Turks, the Russians could not be defeated by the Persians and we could not be defeated by the Africans. What defeats we have suffered have been local ones, the worst being the Prussian victory in the Congo.

“That...has made us arrogant,” he said. “We are fighting two enemies; not one, and that same holds true for them. It’s just us; Brazil, Japan, the Prussian Congo and Ethiopia will try to stay out of the fighting. None of them could really make a difference to the outcome, with the possible exception of the Congo.”

Highlander coughed. “The Japanese could make a real nuisance of themselves,” he said.

“A month, no more,” Grey said, still not looking at them. “Then the Royal Navies gather the strength to crush their fleet and impose a blockade on Japan that will force them to surrender – or starve. The Congo, by trying to march to Cape Town, could cause real problems.”

He turned to face them, silhouetted against the windows. His form was dark against the light. "I have received a communication from the French Emperor," he said. "This, by the way, remains a secret." He held up a hand to prevent Adams protesting. "The French Emperor has proposed a peace conference – and a ceasefire in place until we meet."

"He's losing," Adams said flatly. "If you think that the voters would accept losing the gains in the Caribbean..."

"I don't and nor does he," Grey said. "He has signalled that he would accept a limited loss of territory in exchange for peace."

There was a long silence. Adams broke it. "I know that you have not informed the War Cabinet, let alone the Imperial Parliament," he said. "I would have been informed otherwise. How do you intend to tell them?"

"That's what I want to decide," Grey said. "General Sir Douglas Highlander, Admiral Sir Martin Benson, First Sea Lord; can the war be won?"

The two military men exchanged glances. "With the new weapons, it might be possible," Benson said. "We have a capable production centre and America and Australia are outside enemy reach. As long as there weren't any other surprises..."

"There would be," Grey said. "Winning the war, by which I mean driving all the way to Paris, would be...difficult. It would certainly be extremely costly and futile; it could bankrupt the Empire." He nodded at Adams. "The last time we went through anything like this, it led to the American Insurgency."

"The North American Parliament intends to have the Caribbean islands," Adams said, stubbornly. "The good women of America will not rest in their beds until those islands are in our hands."

Benson snorted. "And what about the women going to work in Springfield?" He asked. The newspapers had reported on that, with tones from amused to outraged and scandalised. "What do they think of it?"

"Assimilating Cuba and the other islands would be easy," Grey snapped, forestalling an argument. "Assimilating Alaska...well, the serfs would probably prefer to be with us than the Tsar. Assimilating all of New Spain? North Africa? Indochina? It won't work; they're very loyal to the French."

He tapped the table. "The bottom line is simple," he said. "If the war continues, we and they will invent more and more weapons and continue fighting as hard as we can," he said. "Sooner or later, the minor powers will be drawn into the fighting, which will only make it worse. If we're winning, the French and the Russians will make common cause; or we lose, we will end up making an agreement with one of the other powers. By the time one of us comes out on top, the cost will be unimaginably high.

"We have built the United Empire over nearly three hundred years," he said. "By the time the war ends, assuming we win, the empire will be in ruins. We will be bankrupt and ruined and barren. And those, my friends, are the problems of *victory*. We will be looking at *years* of military commitment, just to hold down the French and the Russians. In effect, we will have been defeated – just like the others."

He smiled. "That rather assumes that we win, of course," he concluded. "I don't think that I will have to spell out what might happen if we lose."

The room was silent. "I intend, therefore, to accept the peace offer," he said. "We will get some of the fruits of victory; the Caribbean, Alaska, the French East Indies and perhaps the Philippines, but we will not occupy France itself."

"The Russian Tsar may not go along with that," Highlander said absently. "He is not known for giving up ground, hence his plantations in China."

Adams scowled. "I cannot say that I like the thought of them keeping their own super-ship," he said. "We should demand that they hand that over as well."

Grey shook his head. "We dare not back them into a corner," he observed. "If they hand the ship over to us, they will have to accept semi-permanent subordination to us, even if they hang on to the crew."

Adams nodded. "If we get the islands in the Caribbean, then the North American Union Parliament will go along with it," he said. "What about India, or Australia?"

"I'll be floating it with the Imperial Parliament – in private session – later today," Grey said. "As you were here..."

Adams nodded. "So, now what?"

“We’ll get Alaska anyway,” Grey said. “If we can get the French off our backs, perhaps the Tsar will see sense.”

Highlander nodded. “If he has a ship of his own, then he must know what happened to his...counterpart Tsar,” he said. “They might be the same person.”

“I don’t think that we’ve found a single counterpart,” Adams said. “According to Admiral Jackson, all sorts of things happened in their timeline that didn’t happen here – and the change was...years ago.”

“True, true,” Grey said. “We’ll meet again in a day. By then...I hope to have news for you.”

The letter from the French Emperor made other letters lower their eyes and swear blind that they could not be possibly of the same type as the French letter. Written on very fine paper with a golden pen, perhaps real gold, it was a work of art as much as anything else. It was in Latin, which astonished Colonel Sir Benjamin Phillips, but he understood. Latin was still the common fancy-speech; English didn’t seem to be so prevalent here.

“I assume that you’ve checked for any possible deceits,” Sir Benjamin said, after reading it through twice. Grey took it back with a shocking unconcern for the artwork, placing it back on the table without a care. “Can this be a trap?”

“It could be a long-term plan,” Grey agreed. “However, it is hard to see how such a letter leads to a *trap*.”

Sir Benjamin hesitated. “They could be planning to kill whomever you send to talk to them,” he said. “The bastards in the Middle East were fond of doing that, just to make peace impossible.”

Grey’s eyes showed horror for a long chilling moment. “Your world is uncivilised,” he said flatly. Sir Benjamin didn’t reply. “If they wanted to continue the war, then why not just continue? It takes two to make a peace, but only one to cause a war.”

Sir Benjamin shrugged. “I don’t know,” he said. “So, do you intend to reply?”

“Yes,” Grey said. His tone became thoughtful. “Perhaps they will insist on a

return to the *status quo*, in which case we will have to continue the war. The question, however, is different; how will Admiral Jackson react?"

Sir Benjamin was honestly surprised. "I think he would approve," he said. "It's not as if the war can be won short of years of effort."

Grey frowned. "If there is one lesson from your history, its make certain that you do a good job of ending the war," he said. "You...alternates are strange people."

"The situation is not the same," Sir Benjamin said. "Sir; the choice is yours."

"And the buck stops here," Grey muttered. "Which of your Presidents – their Presidents – came up with that phase?"

"Harry Truman, although I think that it was in existence before him," Sir Benjamin said. He smiled. "For what it's worth, I like this world more."

Grey shrugged. "It's the future that concerns me," he said. "The Russians...might not be very receptive to a peace proposal, and they're a third of the war."

Sir Benjamin considered. "They have no real gains in Poland," he said. He scowled. "Even with the American tanks...hell, they should have been able to do more. Whatever people they have on their side, they're not helping them willingly."

Grey lifted an eyebrow. "How so?"

"An Abrams tank should be almost unstoppable by anything the French have, even antitank helicopters," Sir Benjamin said. "With anti-aircraft systems, the tank would be untouchable, which means that the computers are not working." He smiled. "That in turn means that whoever is in charge doesn't know what they are doing."

Grey scowled. "That means that there might be Americans trapped in Russia," he said. "We'll have to get them out somehow."

Sir Benjamin nodded. "I've sent the information to Admiral Jackson," he said. "Point is; the Russians have weapons that can take them to Paris very quickly. You have a bargaining stick, if you want to use it."

"What can Admiral Jackson do?" Grey asked. "They can't really hurt Russia, can

they?”

“There should be a SEAL team on the *Washington*,” Sir Benjamin said. “They could be sent into Russia, perhaps.”

“Russia is a big place,” Grey said dryly. “They could be held anywhere.” He paused suddenly. “No, that’s not true,” he said. “They’ll be in Moscow somewhere. The Tsar would want them close to him.”

Sir Benjamin smiled for the first time. “So, if we can slip a few people into Moscow, then...”

“Then we can get them out and find out exactly what has fallen into the Russian hands,” Grey said. He smiled with genuine amusement. “I wonder...how many of your ships are scattered around the landscape.”

Sir Benjamin shook his head. “There’s no way to be sure, Prime Minister,” he said. “We didn’t exactly ask to be here.”

“I know,” Grey said. “The problem is that you’re having an effect on us, on our society, that might be very bad in the long run.”

Sir Benjamin considered for a long moment. “Perhaps,” he admitted. “However, change is the natural state of affairs.”

Grey smiled thinly. “Not here, Sir Benjamin,” he said. “Not here.”

Chapter Thirty-Three: Why Doth Treachery Never Prosper?

Bourbon Palace

Paris, France (TimeLine B)

Belen Lefunte looked...stunning; there was no other word to describe her. In a perfect white dress, with a single golden ring on her hand, she looked utterly fantastic. *Contre-Admiral* François Videzun, for the first time, saw her as more than a subordinate, seeing her as a desirable woman for the first time in his life.

"I think that we're both due to marry," Videzun said, "but not to each other."

Belen smiled. The exact line of authority had faded slightly, simply because of the life of the Paris Court. By his arranged marriage to Princess Jasmine, Videzun would be her social superior, but as the wife of Court Phillipe Lavich, Belen would be close enough – close enough to make them almost equals.

"You have my sympathy," she said, and meant it. "Sir..."

She hesitated, but it wasn't difficult to figure out the question. "Don't worry," Videzun sighed. "I won't be sleeping with her."

"Perhaps it's a good thing that title inheritance only proceeds down the male line," Belen said, an odd statement from a self-proclaimed feminist. If Videzun had children by someone other than Jasmine, and that was almost certain, that child would still inherit whatever titles he gained by being married to Jasmine. By some curious alchemy, it would have happened – no matter who he slept with. If he had children by a peasant girl, they would still inherit.

"Maybe," Videzun said. "They don't see a marriage as the same thing we do. Here, it's not a love match, but a cold-blooded arrangement to share...the metaphysical bloodlines."

"Mental lines," Belen said. "Phillipe and I have agreed that my children will be the heirs."

Videzun shrugged. "I don't want to know," he said. He could imagine how that had proceeded – and he was almost envious of their wedding night. His wedding

night would be...uneventful. "Have you made arrangements for the future?"

Belen nodded. "I'm going to remain onshore," she said. "Now that the Russians have some tanks as well..."

Videzun made a grim face. Andre Arsenault deserved a large promotion, far more than the knighthood he had received; his action might have saved the entire front. The war had returned to stalemate – quicker than he would have believed possible.

"We'll have to work on finding out what they have," he said, and knew that there was only one shot left at winning the war outright. Without that, the war was as good as lost. "That's something else we're working on."

Belen smiled. "Yes, dad," she said. Andre Arsenault, who was going to give her away, poked his head into the room. "Andre?"

Arsenault saluted as soon as he saw Videzun. "Belen, the doctor is here to give you the final check," he said. "Admiral...ah...I..."

"Thank you," Videzun said. "Please inform the doctor that I would like to talk to her first."

Arsenault nodded and slipped back out of the door. "This is the one thing I don't like," Belen said. "At least I get a female doctor."

Videzun nodded. The French Court wasn't *that* concerned with little details like virginity – well, not unless the lady in question had a really bad past – but they did insist on checking for sexual diseases. Normally, the bride would have to go through the humiliation of being examined by a male doctor, but Doctor Mimi Rouge, who held the favour of the Emperor, had been volunteered for the task.

"I'll leave then, if you don't mind," he said wryly, and headed out of the door. He heard her chuckle behind him and smiled; there were other things for him to worry about, such as...

"Admiral," Doctor Mimi Rouge said. Her grey face had grown greyer; her hard blue eyes stamped with...disapproval. Her clipped voice was icy and cold.

"Doctor," he said, as gravely as he could. "Have you...?"

“I have done as you have ordered,” Doctor Mimi Rouge said, her tone cold with disapproval. “It has been done.”

Videzun nodded. “And the timing?” He asked. “At what point can we expect to see effects?”

Doctor Mimi Rouge tried to smile. It didn’t quite touch her eyes. “Within an hour or two,” she said. “It takes time for the covering to break down and...”

“Spare me the details,” Videzun said. “All that matters is that it goes ahead.”

The Doctor caught at his arm. “You don’t have to do this,” she said. “He was talking earlier about peace, Admiral.”

Videzun looked sharply at her, then his face cracked into a smile. “It’s a bit late, Doctor,” he said. “Is there anything else?”

She glared at him. “Yes, there is,” she said. “As per procedure in this place” – her sniff would have done credit to any of the Grand Dames in the French Empire – “I have conducted an...examination of the Lady Princess Jasmine. Admiral, she is physically immature.”

Videzun felt sick for the first time since arriving in the strange new world.

“Doctor,” he began, his tone harsh, “I am not going to sleep with her.” He took a breath, grimly aware of his growing rage. “I am as annoyed at this turn of events, Doctor, as you are; I cannot say that I wanted them.”

“She wants to do her duty,” Doctor Mimi Rouge said. “Admiral; be careful with her. She’s smart, but not...knowledgeable enough.”

“I will take care of her,” Videzun said, sharply. “Now, go see to the Lady Belen.”

The Great Hall was filled with people, all hanging around and talking in loud voices. Prime Minister Vincent Pelletier disliked it on sight; it was the perfect place to stage an assassination attempt. The great and the good of France and the empire – Spanish, Italian, Arab, and American Indian – were all within the room, waiting for the Emperor. The golden glitter of lights from the chandeliers flickered around the room, illuminating faces with a suddenness that was almost shocking.

He allowed himself a moment to look for familiar faces. There were the people from the *Charles de Gaulle*, a handful of people in unfamiliar uniforms. They looked out of place; spectacles like this one were hardly common in *their* France. They held their wineglasses oddly and moved with a deliberateness that was almost awkward. There were the Court Phillipe Lavich's family; here to see his wedding and to take a look at his new wife, those who hadn't seen her before. They hadn't all been happy; the guards had intercepted several attempts to assassinate her.

He frowned inwardly as his gaze met the Crown Prince's smile. The fat young man was wandering through the crowd, causing a chain reaction of happy fake smiles and hidden frowns. He was, Pelletier realised, doing it on purpose; as he watched the Crown Prince pinched the bottom of a young woman. Her squeak of protest was music to her tormentor's ear.

Shaking his head, Pelletier headed away from the Grand Hall, entering the antechamber without bothering to knock. The Emperor, looking better than Pelletier had seen him for a while, smiled up at him. He was reading a letter, written on the parchment that the British used for their formal messages, and smiling.

"The British have agreed to meet with my representatives," the Emperor said. "They have proven amiable."

"A masterful settlement," Pelletier said, and meant it. "What are their terms?"

"The Caribbean, the Philippines, the East Indies, a demilitarised zone in New Spain and an end to our support for Quebec," the Emperor said. He smiled. "Not that we've been able to do much supporting anyway, eh?"

Pelletier nodded. "And how much are *we* going to offer?"

The Emperor paused in thought. "We may as well give up the Caribbean, subject to arguing over the exact limits of territorial waters for the fishing fleets," he said. "It's not as if we can take it back. The same goes, more or less, for the East Indies. The Philippines, on the other hand, hadn't been taken and indeed beat off an attack last year, so..."

"Let them take it if they can?" Pelletier asked. "That sounds a little..."

"We can't roll over completely," the Emperor said. "Not with the Russians

sharpening their knives and pulling on their condoms.”

“Majesty,” Pelletier said, more than a little shocked.

The Emperor grinned, almost like a child again. “The demilitarised zone, well we can accept that,” he said. “Quebec? That costs us nothing anyway. With the exception of the Philippines, we can afford to give everything else up.”

Pelletier considered. “The Philippines will be the great sticking point,” he said, thinking aloud. The Emperor snorted dryly. “Perhaps we could offer to trade trading posts and influence in China,” he suggested.

“Perhaps,” the Emperor agreed. “When was the last time anyone ever got any good out of China?”

“The Year of Our Lord 2000, I think,” Pelletier said. “That was when the Chinese Emperor died.”

“True,” the Emperor agreed. “Perhaps they’ll accept that, or maybe a part of Indochina. That place has been nothing, but trouble.”

“True,” Pelletier agreed. “Sire, perhaps...”

A low gong rang through the palace. “Sire, it’s time...”

“Yes, I know,” the Emperor said. He suddenly seemed very old. “Not even an Emperor can be late for a wedding.”

His attendants appeared around him. With their help, he stood up and mounted the chair, which was carried by four of his servants. Pelletier had never quite approved of that custom, but the one thing the Emperor could not afford was to show that he was ill. The Emperor adjusted his crown, placing it firmly on his head, and then nodded to Pelletier.

“Be seeing you,” he said. “Have fun escorting the young lady.”

As soon as the Master of Protocol hit the gong, the room had fallen silent; the crowds parting to open a path towards the throne at the end of the room. The main doors opened and the people bowed, as the Emperor was carried along the path, to

his throne. Observed only by Videzun, the Emperor stumbled slightly as he climbed into his throne; it was big enough for three people his size to sit comfortably.

“Where are the men who stand before me,” the Emperor said. His voice was firm, thanks to a small microphone from the *Charles de Gaulle*. “Where are they...?”

Videzun stepped forward, standing below the Emperor. “I am here,” he said, keeping his voice calm. Beside him, Lavich echoed him; the Count seemed almost nervous. “We stand before you, you who are God’s appointed on Earth.”

They spoke the last line together. The Emperor smiled weakly; the commoners might believe that – they heard it from their priests every week – but the nobles knew better. Videzun smiled to himself; if there was a better demonstration of the power of faith, he had never seen it.

“Marriage is a holy state, conceived by God,” the Emperor said. “If either of you are not worthy, stand down now and seek repentance for your sins.”

His voice echoed across the Great Hall. TimeLine B’s French didn’t ask if there was anyone who objected; it was assumed that such did indeed exist – and that they didn’t matter. Videzun said nothing; Lavich said nothing.

“Where are the women who would marry these men?” The Emperor said. “Let them now come before me.”

Videzun shivered, struck suddenly by a memory of attending a wedding in a nation whose name had never been breathed here. The bride, if she struggled, was tied up – and she was expected to struggle so she could be tied up. In this wedding, the ropes were invisible, but they existed just as much as the light ropes used to bind the brides.

Bastards, he thought coldly.

The main door cranked open, revealing the two women. The gasp that ran through the male crowd wasn’t faked; they were awed by Belen. In her simple gown, she outshone all of the other women in the room, all of them. Beside her, the slightly darkened face of Princess Jasmine contrasted nicely with a purple dress; her dark hair coiled up into a very adult style.

Videzun sucked in his breath. She walked like a child, sombre and serious, aware

of the situation, but not truly understanding it. Her eyes glittered with intelligence – and a curious seriousness that would have been laughable under other circumstances. Despite himself, Videzun felt his heart melt; without him, she would have been married off to someone else, someone who would have seen her as only a burden on him.

“Stand before me,” the Emperor said. Videzun took Jasmine’s hand and smiled at her; beside him, Lavich did the same to Belen. “You have come before me to be married, in the eyes of God,” the Emperor said. “Do either of you wish to end this now?”

It was, as far as Videzun could tell, a serious question. “No,” Belen said, to be echoed moments later by Jasmine. “This is my will.”

Videzun winced. Whatever the origins of the wedding ceremony, it was not of Jasmine’s will. “*Contre-Admiral* François Videzun; you have accepted her hand in marriage. Do you swear, before God, to accept her, to love her, to take care of her and to be with her, until death do you part?”

Videzun bowed. “I do,” he said.

The Emperor smiled. “Count Phillipe Lavich; you have accepted her hand in marriage. Do you swear, before God, to accept her, to love her, to take care of her and to be with her, until death do you part?”

“I do,” Lavich said. “I do.”

The Emperor said nothing for a long moment. “The Lady Belen, daughter of Marie; do you swear to marry this man, to love, to obey, to respect, until death do you part?”

Belen smiled slightly. “I do,” she said.

The Emperor repeated the statement for Jasmine, who also agreed. Videzun wondered, absently, what would have happened if she’d disagreed. “Then I pronounce you man and wife,” the Emperor said. “You may now kiss the brides.”

Princess Jasmine tilted her lips up towards Videzun. He pushed her gently down and kissed her once on the forehead. He muttered an apology under his breath; how could he explain the revulsion at the thought of touching her like that? It would only upset her.

The worst thing that a spymaster, or spy-mistress, could do was to be out in the open. Contrary to endless novels filled with trashy heroic spies and shifty government officials, the real spymasters remained in the background. Under other circumstances, Jacqueline Petal would have enjoyed the wedding ceremony, but it had problems.

“I was hoping that I would see you here,” an oily voice said from behind her. Jacqueline winced and kept it from her face; the last thing she needed was to be groped again. “I have been wanting to make your acquaintance.”

Jacqueline turned slowly to see the Crown Prince, standing there and smiling his oily smile. As always, he smelt slightly; not of shit or waste, but of too many scents. Perfumes and costume smells, all blending together to create a slightly... disagreeable smell. She shuddered inwardly; it wasn't disagreeable, it was awful.

“It is a pleasure to see you again,” she said carefully. Beating hell out of him would have only led to her swift and certain execution. “What can I do for you?”

“I have some questions about your world,” the Crown Prince said. His name was Louis, Jacqueline remembered, but he never let anyone call him that. He pulled her out of the Grand Hall and she shivered. “Perhaps we can discuss it in a room.”

Jacqueline wanted to object, but she couldn't find the words. He pulled her into a room, showing more strength than she had expected somehow, and then he leered at her. “Tell me,” he said. “Is it true that you have weapons that can destroy entire cities?”

Jacqueline stared at him. There was something in his eyes...

“My father has plans, your Admiral has plans...and they all hinge on me,” the Crown Prince said. His voice was somehow...harder than normal; he wasn't even trying to grope her. “Why should I do anything to help you at all?”

Jacqueline suddenly realised what had flickered within his eyes. A sudden flash of razor-sharp intelligence. It was so unexpected that she almost reeled. “Don't you want to be Emperor?” She asked, trying to regain her balance. “Don't you want to rule the world?”

He leaned closer to her, somehow not creeping her out like he had before. “Ah,

but who's going to pull my strings?" He asked. "That's what *you* have in mind, is it not?"

Jacqueline changed the subject, wishing that she could tear off her dress and distract him that way. She had the feeling that it wouldn't have worked. "You have the native capability to rule this Empire," she said. She shuddered; she had to talk to Videzun about this. "Do you even need strings?"

The Crown Prince leaned closer. "I have chosen to play the role of the idiot," he said, all of the lustiness and desire having fled his voice. "If I rule, I rule; that's what is going to happen. Do I rule?"

Jacqueline felt pure fear for the first time in her life. The Crown Prince could rape and murder her – and no one would even care. "You will rule," she said, and held herself together. "I will see to that."

"Good," the Crown Prince said. "You will be beside me, on my throne."

Jacqueline shuddered. The old Crown Prince, the mask, would have been preferable to this...stranger, this new face that had appeared out of nowhere. Consent seemed to be the only course of action; she nodded frantically.

"Good," the Crown Prince said. "Now...let us celebrate our impending union and your rise to the status of Royal Consort." He started to unbuckle his belt. There was a sudden banging at the door. "Yes," he bellowed, in a tone that promised suffering for whoever was interrupting them. "What's happened?"

"Your Highness, your father has been taken ill," a servant shouted. "Your highness..."

"Right on time," the Crown Prince muttered, redoing his belt. "Now, I'm going to claim my Empire...and I'll catch up with you later."

He swept out of the room, leaving Jacqueline to fall back on the bed, shaking. She knew – now – that she'd made a dreadful mistake, one that would have earned her a dismissal from the *Charles de Gaulle*; if she'd remained on the ship. Instead... she looked into her future and shuddered. The old Crown Prince would be...truly preferable to the new one.

Chapter Thirty-Four: None Dare Call It Treason

Bourbon Palace

Paris, France (TimeLine B)

It happened very suddenly. One moment, the Emperor was enjoying one of the handful of times that he could be himself in front of everyone; the next he folded at the knees and fell to the ground. Prime Minister Vincent Pelletier cried out as the Emperor hit the floor; an eerie silence spread out across the room.

“The doctor,” he snapped, taking control. If the Emperor was to be out of commission for any length of time, then...his mind refused to think about it. “Fetch the doctor!”

Doctor Mimi Rouge pushed her way through the crowd, which had gathered to surround the scene. Pelletier glared at the crowd, forcing them back with the remains of his tattered authority, his mind already able to hear the odds calculating behind their heads. He’d never believed in telepathy, but he could read their minds now; *it would be a good idea to be nicer to the Crown Prince...*

“Doctor?” He asked. “What’s happened?”

“Get everyone out of here,” Doctor Rouge snapped. “I need room to breathe.”

“Everyone out, now,” Pelletier snapped, and motioned to the guards. He was grimly certain that some crawler had already sent for the Crown Prince. “Guards...”

“We have a right to know what’s happened,” a Duke said. Pelletier grimly recognised him as one of the main proponents of the war against Russia. “If His Majesty is dead...”

“He’s not dead,” the doctor snapped. “Prime Minister...”

“Everyone out, now,” Pelletier snapped. “A Court will be called as soon as we have something to tell you; I swear it. Guards?”

The guards closed in. They were lowborn to a man; it wasn’t often they got the chance to manhandle a noble. The nobles took one look at them and melted away;

the guards had no nametags, no way of identifying them. The system had been started by the current Emperor's father; a way of keeping his Court under control.

"Thank you," Pelletier said. Lowborn himself, he knew the value of the common man. "Doctor?"

The grey-haired doctor, a minor doctor in her world, the most capable in TimeLine B, shook her head grimly. "A stroke, I think," she said. "He needs to be moved at once to the medical centre here, the one we made by pulling equipment from the *Charles de Gaulle*."

Pelletier frowned as *Contre-Admiral* François Videzun – no, the Lord François Videzun now, he reminded himself – entered. As always, the alternate Frenchman seemed calm and composed; unwilling to get excited. Prince Jasmine followed him, her face drawn with shock. Pelletier allowed himself a flicker of relief; she didn't look as if she was being abused.

By the time she's ready to be taken to bed, he'll be too old, he thought, with a sudden burst of gallows humour. That assumed, of course, that they would live so long.

"My Lord Admiral?" He asked. "What's happened to you?"

Videzun didn't answer. "Doctor?" He asked. "How is he?"

There was something unreadable in the doctor's expression. "A mild stroke," she said. "He has to be moved at once, to the medical centre."

Videzun nodded. "Would it be better to move him to the ship?" He asked. "It still has a more capable medical centre and sickbay."

Pelletier scowled. *Why didn't I think of that?*

"He wouldn't survive the trip," the doctor said. "As it is, it's going to be close."

Pelletier took a deep breath. If the Emperor recovered quickly, then everything would be fine – until the next time. If he was unable to discharge his duties, his son would have to take over...and the Crown Prince was unfit for the role. And yet...no one would challenge him and call the principle of male inheritance into question. It would be too risky; all of the higher nobles were vulnerable to that kind of charge.

“Doctor,” he said slowly, “how long will it be before he’s fit to resume his duties?”

Doctor Mimi Rouge stared at him. “A long time,” she said. Her tone was filled with disbelief – and a certain kind of horror. “His system has been abused for years and he just kept putting more pressure on it.” She poked his body thoughtfully. “If he recovers soon, he will need a total fitness program to aid in his recovery, not the stress of running a global empire.”

One of the guards had had the presence of mind to send for the nurses and their stretcher. With some help, they lifted the Emperor onto the stretcher, preparing to move him to the medical centre.

“I may have to operate,” she said. “If that happens, he could be out of it for a very long time.”

“Father,” the Crown Prince’s voice said. Pelletier felt a flicker of pure anger; the Crown Prince didn’t seem to be too concerned. It was almost as if he had expected it. “What’s happening to him?”

“We’re taking him to the medical bay,” Doctor Rouge snapped. “Young man; you will end up running the Empire.”

The Crown Prince hesitated. Pelletier looked sharply at him; there was something hidden within him. “I see,” he said finally. “I see...what you mean.”

Pelletier looked at him for a long moment. “Until the Emperor recovers, you may have to discharge his duties under the Regency Protocols,” he said. “Are you fit for the task?”

The Crown Prince swallowed. Pelletier wondered if he would be smart enough to allow his civil service to run the Empire. And yet...there was still the strange feeling of...*wrongness* around the Crown Prince. He scowled and looked down at the Emperor’s body. How could such shallowness have come from such nobility of blood and behaviour?

“Yes, Prime Minister,” the Crown Prince said finally. Pelletier wondered exactly what had happened to him; had the shock of suddenly facing the throne forced him to develop into a genuine man? “I will discharge it to the best of my abilities.”

Pelletier nodded slowly. There wasn't a choice; not one that wouldn't have triggered a civil war. "Then I invoke the Regency Protocols," he said. "If you would care to have the Master of Protocol dress you and..."

The Crown Prince nodded. When he spoke, his voice was different; harder and more calculating. "Yes, Prime Minister," he said. He didn't even show his previous distrust and dislike of the Master of Protocol. "I'll do that now, and then we can make the formal announcement."

He swept out of the room. Pelletier watched him go, a feeling of foreboding growing within him. "Admiral?"

Videzun frowned. "The British could have poisoned him," he said, as the Emperor was carried out of the room. "This place is filled with spies and agents. You can't scratch your nose without someone taking it as a sign to start something violent."

Pelletier gave him an icy look. "The British have accepted our Emperor's decision to offer peace," he said. "There will be a price – there always is – but it is better than defeat."

Videzun's gaze was oddly triumphant. "That's up to the new Emperor," he said. "The Emperor is dead; long live the Emperor."

"The Emperor is out for the moment," Pelletier corrected. "He will recover soon."

Videzun shrugged. "I hope you're right," he said, and left the room.

As he walked quickly through the palace, Videzun wasn't unaware of the small groups, chatting away in corners. Attention focused on him, people wondering what he knew and what he could tell them, but he ignored them. The ornate corridors were strangely quiet; people were nervous, unsure of the ground changing underneath them.

He'd asked Princess Jasmine to go to his quarters. Snide comments aside, they would be in separate beds, even though she would be the Lady of his House. He allowed himself a moment to plan the manor house he intended to build in the future, before entering the private room. As soon as he entered, he stopped; Jacqueline Petal was lying stumped in a chair.

“Jacqueline?” He asked. She looked...almost beaten, almost raped. If her clothes, the neat dress she’d worn, hadn’t been intact, he would have wondered...but she didn’t even seem mussed. She just seemed...beaten. “*Lieutenant*, report,” he snapped.

Jacqueline Petal looked up at him. Her delicate face, speaking of a Chinese or – more likely – Indochinese ancestor somewhere within her family tree, was torn. She might not have been crying, but she was...shocked, upset...stunned.

“We made a mistake,” she said. Her voice, normally so vivid, was flat. “We made a mistake somewhere; didn’t look at the signs. We made a mistake.”

Videzun glared at her. He didn’t have time for this, whatever it was. “Explain,” he snapped. “What’s happened?”

“The Crown Prince,” Jacqueline said. Her voice seemed almost...scared. “We underestimated him.”

“The man’s an absolute swine,” Videzun said. Something wasn’t right; he could tell that now. How could the Crown Prince have molested her so badly without hurting her or even leaving her un-mussed? “What happened?”

“He wants me,” Jacqueline said. Videzun could tell that wasn’t the entire story. “We missed the signs; saw him as a spoiled brat, nothing more. He’s intelligent, Admiral; more capable than we thought.” Her voice was running on. “He’s his father’s son, Admiral; and we missed it.”

Videzun took a breath. “In what way?” He asked. Panic could wait until they knew what was happening. “In what respect is he his father’s son?”

“He’s clever, cleverer than he let us know,” Jacqueline said. “He played the fool, the lecherous spoiled brat, to keep everyone fooled. He did it well enough to fool everyone, even his father – even us, even me.” Her voice twisted. “The Emperor is dead?”

“The Emperor is in a coma,” Videzun said. He paused. “Do you think that he will try to kill his father?”

Jacqueline shrugged. “I have no way of knowing,” she said. “He wants me.”

Videzun thought quickly. “It won’t be bad,” he said. “Perhaps if you’re the

mother of his Heir...”

Jacqueline looked up at him for the first time. “It will be,” she said. “That man is a dark man. It’s like seeing a mirror shatter; he’s not stupid, not stupid at all.”

“Pull yourself together,” Videzun snapped. “What do you have to report?”

Her voice remained dead. “Apart from the Crown Prince being dangerous,” she said. “Very little. People are only talking in hushed voices and...”

“You had other things on your mind,” Videzun concluded. How dare she fail him now? “What about the ship?”

“The preparations for Sealion are completed, including the special weapons,” Jacqueline said. “Captain Jean-Pierre Mauroy pretends high confidence.”

Videzun smiled at her tone. Few people respected Mauroy. “That’s good,” he said. “By now, the Americans on the *George Washington* must know that we exist.” He smiled; he’d given up hope of keeping it a secret when the British-Americans had invaded New Spain. Once Havana fell, they would have all the proof they could have desired – enough to convince even the American Congress, which didn’t exist in this timeline.

Jacqueline nodded. “Their AWACS might have tracked the Russian transmissions as well as our own,” she said. “Even without that...”

Videzun nodded. The Paris Court was so full of spies and agents that it was completely porous. God alone knew how many Frenchmen – to say nothing of the other nationalities within the Empire – took the British shilling. If the British didn’t know about the defeat in Poland, then it was through the fault of their spymasters.

He scowled. What else might have fallen into the hands of the Russians? Coming to think about it; there had been German ships and troops in the multinational force. Might they have landed in the Congo? Might the Japanese ships have gone to Japan? If a German troop contingent had landed in Prussia, they would have found out about it, wouldn’t they?

“Then they will have some knowledge,” he said, and adjusted his plans. “If Sealion succeeds, then we will have the ability to hold them off long enough to build our own nuclear warhead and negotiate an advantageous peace,” he said. “If

Sealion fails...well, we're no worse off."

"The total number of troops that could be landed won't make any serious difference to the Eastern Front," Jacqueline said. A low gong rang through the Bourbon Palace. "What's that?"

"That's the call to the Throne Room," Videzun said. "Our new Lord and Master is about to announce himself."

Not exactly to Videzun's surprise, Princess Jasmine met him at the door, taking his hand and leading him in. Her behaviour would have been amusing in an older woman; for a child, it was just strange. He glared at Jacqueline, to make her wipe her smirk off her face, and entered the main Throne Room. Unlike before, it was draped in black; black banners and decorations hung everywhere.

"Silence for the Right Honourable Crown Prince," the Master of Protocol intoned, as the Crown Prince entered. Videzun narrowed his eyes as the Prime Minister followed him; his face drawn and old. Vincent Pelletier was getting old, he felt; too old for the job.

"My father has been taken gravely ill," the Crown Prince said. Videzun frowned; he heard, for the first time, what Jacqueline had meant. The dandy and lecherous man had vanished; replaced by an almost psychopathic man. "His recovery is not expected anytime soon."

There was a long pregnant pause. The Court had expected that – most of the discussions had been about what to do with all of the power balance suddenly shattered – but they weren't prepared for the new Crown Prince. A lot of plans would suddenly have to be redesigned, or perhaps put off until the new power balance had settled down. An internal civil war was fine; chaos – dreadful disruptive chaos – was not.

"In discussions with my father's advisory council, it has been decided, under the Regency Protocols, that I will rule as his regent until he recovers, or until I come into my own," the Crown Prince said. Videzun frowned; the Regency Protocols established a line of succession that only applied if the Emperor was wounded or mad or otherwise unable to rule. "That decision has been accepted."

The pause expanded again. No one spoke. "The Legislature has accepted the

decision,” the Crown Prince said. “The French Empire, until my father recovers, will be ruled by me.”

It was a mistake, Videzun knew; in public, the Empire was always the Bourbon Empire. In private, the French could admit that they ruled, but never in public. The Bourbon line was a confused mishmash of ruling families, intermingling bloodlines together, and they came from all over the Empire’s noble families.

The Crown Prince seemed not to care. “For the moment, everything will proceed as my father wished,” he said. “I will hold a formal Court one week from today, when we will place the situation on a more formal footing. Until then, I ask you all to pray for my father, and for the empire.”

“The meeting is over,” the Master of Protocol intoned. There was no dissent; everyone was working rapidly to rethink their plans. “You may leave.”

“Lord Admiral Videzun, attend me,” the Crown Prince said, before Videzun could leave. “Lady Jasmine, Lady Jacqueline, attend me.”

Jacqueline shuddered beside him as the crowds passed her, some of the courtiers giving her envious looks as they passed. They didn’t know, didn’t understand, and so they thought that she was honoured – just as they would have been.

Videzun stepped up and knelt in front of the Crown Prince; the two women curtsied. “You may rise,” the Crown Prince said. He looked down at Jacqueline for a long moment. “My future consort,” he said. “How are you now?”

The question was so inane that Videzun almost laughed. “My Emperor,” he said carefully, “we have the small matter of Sealion.”

“Indeed,” the Crown Prince said. He smiled to himself; his eyes suddenly dark and intelligent. As if...as if he had chosen to take off the mask for good. “Tell me, Lord Admiral; can Sealion succeed?”

“Of course it can,” Videzun said. He smiled. “It all depends on us damaging the British Home Fleet – and we have the weapons to do just that.”

The Crown Prince nodded slowly. “Are our carriers as capable as the ones that the British have built?”

“They’re a different design,” Videzun said. “We have concentrated more on anti-

shipping capability. Only one carrier has a full complement of defending fighters.”

“Indeed?” The Crown Prince asked. “Aiming for a sucker-punch?”

“With the weapons from the *Charles de Gaulle*, we can ensure that most of the fleet is taken out or seriously damaged – or driven out into the open seas,” Videzun said. “My Emperor, it can be done – but it has to be done now.”

Vincent Pelletier, perhaps no longer Prime Minister, spoke in a cold dead voice. “Your farther wanted peace,” he said. “If you launch an invasion of Britain, and it succeeds, there will still be the other sections of the British Empire.”

“And we will have peace – with Russia,” the Crown Prince said. “You personally will contact the Tsar, offering him our share of China in exchange for peace.”

Videzun frowned to himself. France might have had influence within China, but very little formal territory – not after nearly nine years of civil war in China. “They will accept that,” the Crown Prince said. “That will give us time to build up and destroy them later, when they run out of wonder weapons of their own.”

He paused, significantly. “Britain remains the greatest threat to us,” he said. “They have the *Washington*; they have one of the largest resources of technology from your timeline. Defeating them...is our only priority.” He looked down at Videzun for a long chilling moment. “I am placing you in command of the combined assault,” he said. “You will have total authority. Do not fail me.”

Videzun knelt again. “I will not fail you,” he promised, thinking furiously. How did this alter *his* plans? “Britain will fall before us.”

“Good,” the Crown Prince said. He nodded at Pelletier. “I will be making a few changes later, of course, but for the moment we will leave them.” Pelletier bowed. “Now, leave me and the Lady Jacqueline alone, if you would.”

Chapter Thirty-Five: Turning Points

Springfield USA

Nr New Orleans, North American Union (TimeLine B)

Somewhat to Admiral Jackson's surprise, the North American Union had in fact developed a cinema industry that in scope – if not in sophistication – rivalled Hollywood, if not Bollywood. Calcutta, he'd been informed, had also developed a film industry, mainly concentrating on tales of empire and adventure in the Far East. He grinned; one little advantage of the massive film library from the *George Washington* had been the ability to sell films to the New York set.

"I wonder how long it will be before someone starts building a Hollywood here," he'd commented to Morrigan, after the deal had been signed. Working capital was always useful; Springfield was growing at an astonishing rate.

"Not too long, I think," Morrigan had said. "Still, how many sex scenes will be allowed on screen here?"

Jackson smiled at the memory and returned to the video playing on the main screen. The United Empire, ever since it had developed filming techniques, had believed firmly in recording things for posterity, such as the final surrender of Havana Harbour and City. The Spanish commander of the island had fought very well, holding out for nearly two weeks, before finally offering to surrender. Despite slave revolts, he'd held out...and the cost had been appalling.

"Enough diseases to cost us all our lives," he muttered grimly. The United Empire knew less about medical science than the Americans of TimeLine A, even though they knew more than they had at the same stage of technological development. Dozens of soldiers had become ill and had had to be transported back to Florida.

There was a tap on the door. "Come in," he shouted, wishing that he could afford a secretary. It wasn't the money that was the problem, but the security risk; a secretary could be working for anyone. "Enter!"

The door opened, revealing Lieutenant Han Wushi. "Admiral, the Prime Minister would like to see you."

"Thank you," Jackson said. Lieutenant Han Wushi handed all 'diplomatic'

matters, even though Springfield was technically part of the North American Union. The entire situation was confused; he had a feeling that the Prime Minister and the Viceroy liked it that way. “Please send him in.”

He stood as Prime Minister Adams stepped into the office. “Good afternoon, Prime Minister,” he said. Learning to call an American leader anything other than ‘Mr President’ had taken time. “What can I do for you?”

Prime Minister Lord Roger Adams smiled wryly at him, taking a seat without waiting for the invitation. “Well, for a start, I wanted to say thank you,” he said. “Cuba has fallen to the authority of the North American Union, under the United Empire.”

Not for the first time, Jackson wished that he understood the politics a little better. The North American Union had full Home Rule, but at the same time it was subordinate to the Imperial Parliament, to which it sent nine Members of the Imperial Parliament; MIPs. The North American Union had contributed most of the forces involved in the battles for New Spain; did that give them authority over them?

“You’re welcome,” he said. “Alaska will fall too.”

Adams smiled. Jackson smiled back; in this timeline the North American Union had had its eye on Alaska for a long time. With the small, but very powerful advance closing in on the capital city and military base at Alexandergrad, which had never had a counterpart in TimeLine A, it wouldn’t be long before Alaska collapsed.

“I have a great deal of faith in my people,” Adams said. “Now that the majority of the French fleet has managed to flee to Indochina, we can continue to dominate the seas. Unfortunately, a blockade is unlikely to have any serious effect.”

Jackson scowled. The French Fleet had managed something he would have believed to be impossible, managing to escape under cover of darkness. At full steam, they would have had an easy task – outrunning any possible pursuit. Worse, from the point of view of the Royal North American Navy, Panama remained in French hands, which meant that any reinforcing of the Royal Australian Navy would take time – unless ships were spared from watching the Russian Far Eastern Fleet...

He chuckled. Adams looked at him oddly. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I would have

thought that strategy would be simpler with fewer fleets in the world.”

Adams smiled. “The French rule the Mediterranean and the Baltic,” he said. “Their control of the Egyptian Canal gives them more strategic flexibility than we have. With a navy that’s smaller than the Royal navies, it’s still a worthy opponent.” He sighed. “With some exceptions, I don’t think that there will be many land adjustments on the Southern Front.”

Jackson understood. New Spain was loyal to the Bourbon Empire. The United Empire would have to occupy it, or force the people out of the region. “Alaska, on the other hand, is populated by people who would be quite happy to work for us – the serfs are revolting,” Adams continued.

“I know they are,” Jackson punned. Adams groaned at him. “So, when are they going to rebel?”

“If that’s the standard of low humour in your timeline, then I think that you won’t find a job as a comic here,” Adams said. His tone was wry. “There are important matters to discuss, Admiral. As you may have known, I was in London three days ago.”

Jackson frowned. “I didn’t know that,” he said. “What happened?”

“The French have sued for peace,” Adams said flatly. “We have you to thank for that, it seems.”

Jackson lifted an eyebrow. “You’re welcome,” he said thoughtfully. “And what did the British decide?”

“We discussed it backwards and forwards, and then we asked the War Cabinet, and then the inner council discussed it,” Adams said. “The final decision was to accept the overture, based on certain conditions. While we won’t see land in New Spain, we *will* keep the islands in the Caribbean.”

Jackson sighed. “In my timeline, failing to fight the war to the end only means that you have to fight it again later,” he said.

Adams held his gaze for a long chilling moment. “In your timeline,” he said. “In your timeline, the war...closest to this one bankrupted the winners and utterly shattered the losers. Yes, it was discussed; if we continue along this path, for the one year, two years, five years...perhaps even ten years, the three superpowers

will be shattered by the war.”

His voice darkened. “I am not willing to countenance that as a price for victory,” he said. “Neither was the British Prime Minister. Neither were the other Prime Ministers. And, apparently, neither are the French. Admiral, the war will end soon.”

Jackson wasn’t sure what to say. Experience in Vietnam, Iraq, countless other wars in countries that had never existed in this timeline...all had taught the United States to finish the job, or else fight again, later. In the long run, it was quicker and cheaper to end the war completely, rather than give the enemies time to rebuild and continue to antagonise you.

Adams looked down at the map for a moment. “It was discussed giving you Cuba,” he said. “When it was proposed, no promises were made; we might not have been able to keep them.” He sighed. “With that guy, whoever he is, in Cuba, without your support the attack might have failed.”

“Viceroy Cortez’s son,” Jackson said. He’d been told that, afterwards. “And? What was the conclusion?”

“There are still slaves on the island,” Adams said. “Do you still want it?”

Jackson considered. It was true that Springfield did a lot of the original objective; building a power base for the Americans before they could be absorbed by the North American Union. At the same time, the threat of absorption would always exist in Springfield. Cuba...didn’t have that problem.

“Yes,” he said. “We do want it, Prime Minister.”

“I wondered,” Adams said. He smiled. “All the wealth we are told about in stories of the Caribbean seems to have vanished over the years. It’s not that good a place now, Admiral; you will have to absorb a population of hopping mad slaves.”

“We’ve done it before,” Jackson said, and knew that that wasn’t entirely honest. The North American Union had never beat hell out of the slave-holding South in a civil war; they’d bought most of the slaves and freed them, giving them a place to live and work.

“There will be negotiations,” Adams said. “You might be asked to be a county of the North American Union, or an independent state within the United Empire. If

either of those are acceptable to you...?”

“Either would do,” Jackson said. Independence...wasn’t a possibility, not with only the resources of the *George Washington*. One thing had stayed constant about Cuba; it was a very poor country. “Being an independent state would be better, I feel.”

Adams nodded. “I’ll have to discuss it with the Parliament, all Parliaments, but I think it can be done,” he said.

The last thing that Maggie O’Brien had expected was to be asked to an interview at one of the new hotels in Springfield, one that had housed a handful of famous dignitaries. As she passed through the foyer, admiring the golden ring on her finger, she was somehow unsurprised to see Donald Adamson, Special Assistant to the Viceroy, standing there.

“Right this way, Miss O’Brien,” he said. He led her into the stairwell, leading her up a flight of stairs into a back entrance. His presence was revealing; the Viceroy himself sat in the room, along with Admiral Sir Joseph Porter.

“Good afternoon,” the Viceroy said, as she went down on one knee. She’d never met a Viceroy before, but she knew the etiquette. “My compliments on your forthcoming wedding.”

“Thank you, my lord,” she stammered. She was more than a little surprised that the Viceroy knew enough to care that she was getting married. “Will you be attending the wedding?”

“That would be a social coup,” the Viceroy said dryly. “I do not know; I’m not always my own master.”

Maggie’s reporter instincts came to the fore. “Why are you here?” She asked. “What’s happening here?”

Sir Joseph spoke calmly. “The help of the Alternates has been very helpful,” he said. His tone was...strange. “You have lived with them for the last six months; you know this.”

Maggie nodded. “I have watched and I have reported,” she said. “Is there

anything in particular that you want to know?"

Sir Joseph nodded. "As you may be aware, several...groups have set up shop in Springfield," he said. "These range from the suffragettes, who have in fact been encouraging women to take up work within Springfield, to the American Independence Party. We do not find that...encouraging."

Maggie blinked. "What, might I ask, is wrong with paying attention to women's issues?"

Sir Joseph shook his head. "I'm not so worried about that," he said. "Over the past month, there has been a rise in the number of people who have become pregnant out of wedlock."

Maggie flushed slightly. Anderson and she might have engaged in passionate kissing, but they hadn't gone all the way, not yet. "What does that have to do with the people here?" She asked. "How does how they act influence people here?"

The Viceroy smiled grimly. "In almost all of the cases he mentioned, the girl in question swore blind that she'd been taking a contraceptive, bought from here through mail order. In twenty-seven cases out of thirty-five, the girl didn't follow the instructions."

Maggie smiled. "That's a little...odd," she said. "Still..."

"Springfield has expanded radically within the eight months it's been here," Sir Joseph said. "Drug factories have been produced, producing the contraceptive pill, among others. They have caused great good, such as producing painkillers for the men on the front, and great evil. Contraception...is only one part of a growing whole."

"Women have been...taking more of a role in political life recently," the Viceroy said. "They have in fact been demanding that MAPs and MIPs support *their* interests, such as free contraception."

Maggie smiled. She had an idea who was behind that. "I am a working woman," she snapped. "I had a hard time getting here..."

"And now your work is printed all around the world," Sir Joseph said. "You may be making more than your fiancée."

“I had a hard time getting here,” Maggie repeated. “I am in favour of anything that puts women on an equal status to men.”

“Equality of opportunity is a good thing,” the Viceroy said. “Equality of outcome is not. For a start, it’s impossible. The...campaigners want something called ‘Affirmative Action,’ something to ensure that there are equal numbers of women and men in a given workplace. Like it or not, Miss O’Brien, this is...destabilising the political situation here.”

Maggie blinked. “You mean that women are voting for the first time?” She asked, puzzled. “Women have had the vote since 1946!”

“I mean that women are demanding that politicians follow paths that are bad for the country as a whole,” the Viceroy said. “This...Affirmative Action may sound like a good idea, but it’s dangerous – if we have to load matters in favour of the women...”

“With all due respect, I write just as well as a man,” Maggie said. “I hate to be arguing with you, my lord...”

“No, you don’t,” the Viceroy commented.

“But this is a good thing for our society,” she concluded, ignoring the interruption. “It’s starting to get people more involved in the political process...”

“Yes, *exactly*,” the Viceroy said. Sir Joseph snorted. “A Viceroy must take a longer-term view than a Prime Minister; I’m telling you, this is going to disrupt the entire United Empire.”

Sir Joseph coughed. “There are also the handful of women demanding that we take them into military service,” he said. “There aren’t many of them, but they’re growing. Instead of staying at home, they want to join the Army or the Militia. New Zealand, of course, does allow women in the Militia, but they’re weird.”

“I think the idea was that no woman would join anyway,” the Viceroy muttered. “We’re straying from the point; Miss O’Brien, are your friends likely to encourage this?”

Maggie hesitated. She wished – oh, how she wished – that she could talk to Anderson about this, or even Sharon. “I don’t think so,” she said, and hoped that it was the right answer. “They’re not bad people.”

Sir Joseph smiled grimly. “The path to Hell is paved with good intentions,” he said. “Also a lot of bad intentions, but that hardly matters here. What will they do – here – if this Affirmative Action thing falls through?”

“I don’t think that they will do anything,” Maggie said. “They’re...not a large group, my lord. If they can get on with recruiting people on an equal basis, such as women from the People, then they’ll get on with that.”

“They have been doing that,” the Viceroy said. “God knows, I would be delighted to see more involvement from the People in our North American Union, but like this? Do you have any idea how many women flee from there each year?”

Maggie guessed. “Hundreds?”

“In the last month, more than two thousand have fled,” the Viceroy said. “There’s only several hundred thousand of the People in all, so that’s a large percentage of their female population. They’re...not happy.”

Sir Joseph smiled grimly. “They might start a rebellion against us,” he said. “They would be smashed flat, of course, but it would be costly.”

The Viceroy smiled. “This effect...has been noticed,” he said. “What will happen when some of the women hunters turn up here?”

Maggie blinked. “They come to capture a runaway,” Sir Joseph explained.

Maggie felt a flash of pure anger. “If they have any decency at all,” she snapped, “they’ll refuse to help them or allow them to operate within Springfield.”

“Exactly,” Sir Joseph said. “That alone will cause trouble.”

The Viceroy smiled grimly. “Still, if they won’t make the problem worse,” he said. “I cannot say that I approve of that particular problem you know. There are others. What happens if a girl claims to have taken a contraceptive, but lies?”

Maggie said nothing. “Do we force the boy to marry her?” The Viceroy asked. “Do we make the girl bring the child up on her own?”

Maggie grinned suddenly. “Tell everyone that that’s a possibility,” she said. “The warning...”

“Will do nothing,” the Viceroy said. “Why do I have the feeling that it’s only going to get worse?”

“I understand that you’re in line for a peerage,” Admiral Jackson said. Anderson nodded. “Congratulations, I think.”

“Thank you,” Anderson said. “Launching the first carrier strike in history is bound to do something for me.”

Jackson smiled. “I suppose that it beats a medal,” he said. “What sort of peerage?”

Anderson shrugged. “I suspect a baronetcy,” he said. “It might be a knighthood, but those don’t come with permanent rights. Seeing that they’re as pleased with Maggie, as they are with me, then they might want a permanent status for me and my family.”

Jackson smiled. He’d never fully understood the peerage system, but there were titles that were passed down through the family tree, and others that only lasted for the lifetime of the title-holder. The latter, as he understood it, had to be confirmed by the respective parliaments.

“And you’re going to get married,” he said. “Have a good time before the wedding.”

“Now, that wouldn’t be right,” Anderson said. They shared a smile. “Seriously, I trust that you will attend?”

Jackson nodded. “There will be seven weddings this month,” he said. “I’m supposed to be attending all of them and officiating at two of them.”

“Your people are getting married to our people,” Anderson said. “Is that a good sign?”

“I don’t know,” Jackson said. He was about to say more, but then his desk radio started to buzz. “Excuse me,” he said, picking up the radio. “Jackson here.”

“Admiral, we just got a flash-burst from the AWACS in England,” Captain Morrigan said. “I think that all hell is about to break loose.”

Chapter Thirty-Six: Peace at a Cost

Iron Palace

Moscow, Russia (TimeLine B)

Petrovich prostrated himself before the Tsar. The Monarch glared at him, then switched his glare to some of his generals, including the ones who'd survived the French bombing of their manor house. Petrovich allowed himself a quick smile; the incompetent generals were getting the blame.

He grinned, his face pressed into the ground and unreadable. The Generals had been the most vocal against the new technology, both the damaged or destroyed Abrams and the home-built tanks. They had feared losing their positions if they were unable to handle the new level of warfare – and so they had blundered. The chance to destroy the French Army, at least in the view of the Tsar, had been lost.

“Incompetent dolts,” the Tsar snapped. His headsman, a grim-faced man who was completely loyal to the Tsar, smirked at the assembled generals. “We have lost seven priceless units, thanks to your incompetence!”

Petrovich shrugged. The Tsar had formal control of the combined army – and chose idiots to lead it. Of the Tsars, only seven of them had been legitimate in any way that made sense through the prism of the original history; the others had been successful usurpers or nobles who managed to plant their behinds on the throne. Holding Moscow, more or less, made one the Tsar; Lord of Lords.

One of the generals began to stammer an apology. “My lord, the peasants broke and ran,” he protested. Petrovich dimly remembered that the general had noble blood somewhere within him, clearly very diluted indeed. “They were unprepared for the new French weapons and their natural cowardice took control.”

“And what did they have when your father asked for my help in suppressing a riot on your estate?” The Tsar asked. The nobles got private armies; none of them big enough to pose a real threat. “I seem to recall that you yourself proved reluctant to take your Cossack unit and engage them...”

He allowed his voice to trail off suggestively. Higher-ranking nobles had many sons, few who would inherit, so the younger ones went into the army – or schemed to kill their brothers. It was a dog-eat-dog world, Petrovich had realised,

one hardly capable of facing up to the requirements of modern warfare. The real problem was that Russia dared not educate its serfs and peasants, just to prevent them from revolting, which meant that they would always be at a disadvantage.

“You have betrayed me for the last time,” the Tsar said. The general made a noise of protest; the Tsar seized upon it. “Your conduct has led to a disgrace. Ivan?”

The headsman stepped forward, already lunging with his axe. Seconds later, there was blood on the ground. “Have these shirkers removed to a penal battalion,” the Tsar ordered another Court Jew. “Now...Stefan, Petrovich, attend me. Everyone else may leave my presence.”

Petrovich had never seen the process of departing the Tsar’s presence before. The nobles left, banging their heads against the ground in a process of extreme contrition. The headless body was removed quickly; the head remained where it had fallen. The entire process, he realised, was humiliating – it was designed to show their total inferiority to the Tsar.

He sat back on his haunches; it was as close as anyone got to being relaxed in the presence of the Tsar. Stefan entered the room and knelt as well; his semi-friend made no sign of his friendship as he knelt. Petrovich understood; the poor man cared deeply for his daughter, and yet he had no choice, but to watch her being used as a bargaining chip by the Tsar.

“You may talk freely,” the Tsar said, almost conversationally. Petrovich knew that he could believe as much or as little of that as he liked. “Why did the planned offensive failed?”

Petrovich smiled. The trick, in these situations, was to place the blame on the person the Tsar had already decided was guilty. Never mind that it had never been *planned* as an offensive, nor that no one had expected that the French would have a weapon capable of harming an Abrams. Petrovich was still kicking himself over that little mistake; he’d assumed that the French carrier would be keeping all of its units together.

“We were successful at breaking the French offensive,” he said. “The Abrams turned enough of their tanks into death traps that the offensive could be broken quite easily. The intervention of the helicopters was annoying, but hardly a defeat.” He smiled; one helicopter had fallen to a SAM from the *Stalingrad*’s troops. The French must be as concerned about preserving the alternate units they had as the Russians were. “In effect, it was a rout.

“Unfortunately, certain generals” – he nodded towards the head on the ground – “were not prepared for the force of modern warfare. By the time our forces were ready to advance and crush the enemy, the enemy had already moved out of the trap that we had painstakingly created. When the two jaws of our trap met, only a handful of enemy units were trapped.”

It was, he knew, a glossy version of the truth. The Tsar didn’t seem to care. “I have had to make one example,” he said. He waved a dismissive hand towards the head on the ground. “Will I have to make others?”

Petrovich felt his blood run cold, but the Tsar didn’t seem to be looking at him. “A defeat on this scale will provoke some of the Dukes or the Boyars,” the Tsar said. “They will feel that I am weak, that they can move against me with impunity.”

Petrovich scowled. One unbreakable rule was that no one, apart from the Tsar, was permitted troops within two hundred miles of Moscow and St Petersburg. That left personal guards and assassins to do the dirty work. An attempted coup would lead to a bloodbath – and whoever came out on top would enjoy the support of the country.

“Majesty, they will not feel that you are weak,” Stefan said. Stefan was loyal, he *had* to be loyal; a Court Jew had no friends or allies, apart from his master. “It may have been a failure, but it was not a defeat.”

“Ah, Stefan,” the Tsar said. His tone was mocking. “You always give good counsel. Still, I must do something to regain my power...and the French Crown Prince has offered me a way out of the war.”

Petrovich blinked. It was...unlike the tsar to abandon the war, just because of a few hundred thousand casualties. “Majesty?” Stefan asked carefully. “A way out of the war? Has he surrendered to you and your armies?”

The Tsar let out a bellowing laugh. “Oh, no, good Stefan; the Crown Prince does not feel defeated. He does, however, have other plans – mainly to face the British.”

Petrovich lifted an eyebrow. The Tsarist Secret Service had reported on the battles in New Spain, which were slowing down, and the successful strike against the base at Panama. If the French thought that they were losing – and they had no way

to know about the weapons that had fallen into Russian hands – then they might want to sue for peace and...

They see Britain as the main threat, he reasoned, and realised what the French intended to do. Simple logistics, the bane of military plans, would limit their losses if they lost, and if they won...the rewards might be endless. But to do that, they needed the Russians off their backs.

“We cannot trust them, of course,” the Tsar said. “They attacked Russia treacherously, with the intent of dictating peace in this very palace. Still, a year or two of peace might be worth the effort, don’t you think?”

“Peace on good terms is always preferable to war,” Stefan said. His tone was hopeful. “My Majesty; is it your intention to accept their offer?”

Petrovich coughed. “Sire, what are their terms?” He asked. “It would be foolish to accept a halt in place.”

The Tsar leaned forward, his face smiling with a hellish glee. “They have agreed to give us China,” he said. “Their stations in China and their Chinese regiments will be turned over to us. They have also agreed not to contest with us over Persia.” It took Petrovich a moment to connect Persia with Iran, which was being fought over by all three empires. “Enough for peace?”

Petrovich considered, wishing that he dared to offer a completely honest opinion. “They will be planning to stab us in the back again,” he said. Stefan nodded beside him. “If we let them off now...they’ll be back.”

“Perhaps,” the Tsar said. “That is why you, Lord Petrovich, will be in charge if building the new army.”

Petrovich’s mind raced. *I don’t have a power base, so launching a coup would be difficult for me. At the same time, the army is a power base in itself – one that will be a target for any rebellious noble with a grudge...*

Stefan spoke calmly. “My Majesty, do you not feel that that will offend the nobles?”

The Tsar spat once. “*That* for the nobles,” he said. “Those who are plotting to seize my throne will have to face a loyal army led by a loyal man.”

Petrovich kept his face totally blank. “I live only to serve,” he said. “Exactly what do you wish me to do?”

The Tsar didn’t exactly lack for courage or cunning. It was one of the reasons he’d held the throne so long. “I will have to change some of my objectives,” he said. “With all of the new technology lose in the world, those who fail to master it will be destroyed. I will not be destroyed, and you are the person with the greatest experience of building a modern army.”

Petrovich hesitated. “Sire, the tasks will be harder than you imagine,” he said. The Tsar’s face darkened. “Building a modern army is not just weapons, but equipment and training as well. A massive conscript army is not...suitable for the task at hand.”

The Tsar held his gaze. Peasants with combat experience caused the worst riots in Russia. The Tsar approved of this, at least to Petrovich’s thoughts; it weeded out the worst or the stupidest nobles, who had to live on their estates.

“You would advocate creating a professional army and officer caste?” He asked. The Russians took those from the nobility; the concept of promotion from within the ranks was alien to them. “That could be...problematic.”

Petrovich nodded. “We will have to copy some of their structures,” he said. “It’s the only way to enforce parity.”

“I thought that that was very clever myself,” Stefan said, afterwards. They were seated together in his office, drinking mulled French wine. Most Russians drank Vodka, or a beer produced by the peasants, but the nobility drank French wine. Petrovich, who remembered the Soviet attempts to break into the wine market, thought that that was probably a good thing.

Petrovich lifted an eyebrow. “What do you mean?” He asked. “I thought I was responding to a situation.”

Stefan smiled thinly. “The nobles control all the...what did you call them? Means of production? If you have some control over them...”

Petrovich nodded slowly. “If I have that control – if the Tsar has that control – then Russia will have a chance,” he said. He shook his head. Russia in this world

was more of a collection of medieval states than anything else, certainly not a modern nation in the conventional sense.

“Ah,” Stefan said. “But if we adapt as you suggest, we’ll become the enemy.”

Petrovich smiled grimly. “Answer me a question,” he said. “Do you think that Russia can win a renewed war?”

“It would be treason to disagree with the Tsar’s attitude,” Stefan said. “Whatever I personally thought, it would not change anything...”

“But you argued for peace,” Petrovich said. He lifted an eyebrow. “Stefan, it can’t be done.”

Stefan blinked. “For a moment, I almost believed you,” he said. “This is a joke?” Petrovich shook his head. “You’re serious?”

“Russia simply lacks the ability to adapt in time,” Petrovich said. He paused. “This entire world seems to have remained in technological stasis until the war, but the war only pushed forward some areas of your technology. The British and the French will adapt; Russia...will not.”

Stefan narrowed his eyes. “And what exactly do you plan to do about it?” He demanded. “Why can’t we adapt? You’re not even from this nation!”

“It’s not my Russia, that’s for sure,” Petrovich said, and acknowledged that, deep within himself. “Listen; in order to build a modern state, you need a modern educated workforce. Neither the Tsar nor the Nobles will establish that, for fear of revolution...”

“And they’d be right,” Stefan commented. “Every month, some estate or another goes up in smoke. The effects of the war are really starting to bite.”

“You also need a politically liberal system, and *that* would be resisted by the establishment,” Petrovich continued. “We’re doomed.”

His flat statement seemed to astonish Stefan. “It can’t be that bad,” he said. “What about the tanks you’ve produced?”

“They can’t be improved,” Petrovich said. “Yes, now every noble-owned arms factory is churning them out – but they’re not improving them. Those who have

that sort of ability...don't rise."

Stefan scowled. "The nobles don't want to create possible rivals," he said. "Those who make the suggestions often have their ideas stolen."

Petrovich scowled. "You see my point?" He asked. "The war is going to be lost."

"But if he makes peace with the French," Stefan said, "won't that make it harder for the British to defeat us?"

Petrovich shook his head. "The British will have new and terrible weapons, sooner or later," he said, "and we will be unable to match them." He frowned. "Tell me – how loyal are you to the Tsar?"

The Tsar didn't waste time. Formal control of the local armies were passed over to Petrovich after the formal execution of the previous commander in chief; a man chosen for his limited intelligence. The more Petrovich looked at the situation, however, the more he understood; the Russian system was doomed. In the original timeline, there had been some slack – the Duma and the socialists – but in this timeline there was nothing.

"Get rid of the nobles and Russia vanishes," he muttered to Rebecca, one night in bed. It was true; the nobles were in the position, more or less, of a ruling tribe. Whoever controlled Moscow controlled the armies *and* the methods of communication; whoever controlled those controlled the country. He was certain that many of the nobles had their own private communication links, but it would be hard for them to have too many of them.

He smiled suddenly. The Tsarist Secret Service watched constantly for forms of disloyalty – and betrayal was one thing that was rewarded constantly. Three of the Grand Dukes had been minor dukes – before betraying the last people to hold their position. In the heart of the Tsar's castle, he was probably safer than any of them.

She leaned over him, her breasts brushing against his chest. He felt himself grow harder as she tantalised him. "Are you sure that it will work?" She asked. He'd discussed it with her; if he went down, so did she. The Tsar would never trust her again. "If it fails..."

“I will die,” he said, without showing any emotion. Inside, he was mourning for the Russia he’d left behind when the *Stalingrad* had...fallen through a wormhole or something. He’d discounted the ravings about UFOs; they didn’t make sense at all. He gently squeezed her breast; she’d been relieved when he hadn’t simply raped her on the spot, as soon as they’d been introduced so long ago. Since then, they’d been forced together through circumstances – and making love had taken on a new meaning.

“Yes, you will,” she said. “Is your life worth nothing?”

“I am very attached to my life,” Petrovich said. “Indeed, losing it to a man who would be better off – and probably happier – leading a Mongrel horde would be embarrassing. However, I have no choice, but to risk it – to win or lose it all.”

Rebecca leaned closer to him, almost climbing on top of him. “You might succeed,” she said. “There are those in the civil service who will help you.”

She meant the Jews, Petrovich realised. “If your...companions can help me, then yes, I would love their help,” he said. He paused. “If I win, you will be safe with me.”

The bitterness in her voice was unmistakable. “A lot of Tsars have said that over the years,” she said. “Perhaps you’ll be the one, perhaps not.”

Petrovich rolled over and mounted her. “I always keep my word,” he said, as she opened her thighs for him. “Now...I’m going to make you very happy indeed.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven: Degrade and Diminish

Over Britain

United Kingdom (TimeLine B)

Life in the strange alternate Britain had proven to be...rather less challenging than Lieutenant Alison Hayes had expected. Her sudden graduation to command of the E-2 Hawkeye had left her assigned to Britain to assist the Royal Flying Corps – which had been so pleased to see her that they'd forgotten to be sexist. While she couldn't take part in many of the male-only activities at RFC Maidstone, not having the plumbing for the task, she'd been pleased to discover that she could out-drink almost all of the men.

Still, she had suffered from one problem; she wasn't a combat commander or pilot. She'd complained bitterly about the fighter pilot mafia that left support pilots under-utilised, even in a USAF that was bending more and more towards a ground support role. What was the point, she'd asked bitterly, in having the best of the best of the best aircraft for fighter-to-fighter combat – when there were no opponents who could hope to match the F-14, let alone the F-22. The RFC... treated its fighter pilots like little gods.

She smiled. They expected – and the barmaids at the Dog and Duck pub nearby certainly acted to confirm – that every woman would open her legs for them without a second thought. Rumours of contraceptive implants had reached across the Atlantic even before she had, convincing them that she would be 'safe' to sleep with, without little...consequences nine months down the line. After she'd broken two noses, they'd finally gotten the message – and she'd been able to strike up several friendships.

Still, most of the time she was in the air, watching the French air movements. The French had been improving their aircraft with equal speed and she'd tracked them practicing the same tactics that had been used at Pearl Harbour – and Panama. She'd attempted to warn the commander of the RFC, but he'd been dismissive; there were two thousand Spitfire aircraft on defence duty for England alone – and then there were the four F-18 aircraft from the *Washington*. Indeed, the F-18 crews had scored several notable successes against French bombers, remaining in the background unless they were needed.

"I wonder why they don't send the French jets in to engage," she'd muttered at

the time. The aircraft from the French carrier, one on one, might have managed to score some minor successes, but they were remaining well back. The only air combat there had been had been a draw; both pilots had fired missiles – which had missed – and ran for it.

The day was bright and sunny, perfect flying weather. Neither side really had the hang of night time flying, even though they had radar and navigation beacons. Both sides had raided the other's cities, but not as much as had happened in World War Two. Alison shook her head slowly; the people here seemed less given to atrocity than the people back in timeline A. If some kindly alien space bat had offered her a way home, she wasn't sure that she would have accepted it...

"Alison," the radar operator said. "I have something on the radar."

His tone, clipped and controlled, warned her that something was wrong. She tapped her console, rerouting his input to her screen. "Shit," she said. "Is that what it looks like?"

"Two thousand aircraft," the radar operator said. "I think we're in trouble..."

"You're telling me," Alison said. She scowled, thinking fast. One advantage of running her aircraft here was that she got to make her own decisions. "Take us up, now," she ordered. "Contact the Air Marshall and warn him that we have a major raid in process."

Air Marshall Bentley, for one, was delighted with the AWACS. It had a commander who was – shock, horror – a woman, but she was competent and many in the RFC had grown to accept her, if not always to like her. Its radars were far more capable than the ones deployed to defend Britain, even the newer systems. The drone that floated constantly over France was another example of technology; it gave them total coverage of French movements within the Netherlands.

"Uh-oh," Lieutenant Pearson said. "Sir, I think we have a problem."

Bentley rounded on him. The officer from the *Washington* seemed too worried for it to be something harmless. "What's happened?" He asked, and then the screens from the drone went blank. "What the hell?"

“We just lost the drone...both drones,” Pearson said. He hesitated. “No, the second drone is only damaged...but it’s out of commission.”

Bentley cursed suddenly, vilely. Losing the first drone was bad enough; it was orbiting over France and the ports in the Netherlands. They’d been rebuilt in recent years...and Bentley knew that defence planners within the United Kingdom suspected that that was for only one purpose. Losing the second drone was worse; the nightmare was the French managing to link up the Baltic and Mediterranean Fleets.

Bentley turned to face his communications officer, a young man who should have been enjoying life, not having been recruited into the final line of defence. “Send out the alert,” he said. “Inform the Prime minister that I believe that invasion is likely to happen at any moment.”

The young man didn’t argue. “Yes, sir,” he said, and headed over to the secure lines. Bentley returned to his thinking, trying to grasp at the French plans. If they planned to defeat the Royal Navy first, as they would have to do, they would be looking at a link-up somewhere west of Britain itself.

“A pity we can’t make any real penetration into the Baltic,” he muttered. The AWACS radar did its best, but it wasn’t really prepared for the task. The entire Baltic fleet could be preparing to make its move...and they wouldn’t have a clue about it until it came boiling out of the Baltic looking for trouble.

...Boiling out of the Baltic...?

Bentley smiled suddenly. He’d had an idea. He’d have to kick it upstairs to the First Sea Lord, but if they were lucky, it could be done.

“The Crown Prince clearly doesn’t share his father’s desire for peace,” Prime Minister Lord Harriman Grey said grimly. “Exactly what is the current situation?”

“They’re about to try to invade us,” General Sir Douglas Highlander said. He tapped the map. “In twenty-odd minutes, our defence lines are going to get pasted.”

“The last thing the drone sent before they took it down was the images of the ports on the Netherlands coast,” Admiral Sir Martin Benson said. “They’re

preparing themselves to launch an invasion. If they can defeat the Royal Navy..."

Grey frowned. "*Can* they defeat the Navy?" He asked. "I thought that the two enemy fleets combined would not be able to defeat our navy, let alone the reinforcements we could call from America."

"They clearly think so," Benson said. He frowned. "They took out the two drones using missiles from their ship, from the *Charles de Gaulle*. The mere presence of that ship introduces a whole series of unknown factors into the power balance; it's already shown off one unexpected surprise."

Grey muttered several words under his breath. "Can they take out the Royal Navy?" He asked bluntly. "Admiral, I need to know now."

"I think that we have to act fast," Benson said. "Their carriers are in the Mediterranean, mostly, although we think that they have at least two carriers in the Baltic. That means that they will have a serious deficiency in carriers, even without the Royal North American Navy. If Home Fleet moves to challenge the French Baltic Fleet *now*, we might succeed at defeating them in detail. Home Fleet's carriers are all air defence ships; the French land-based aircraft won't be a serious problem."

Grey closed his eyes. "And if they fail?" He asked. "What about the air defence?"

Highlander frowned. "They should be able to damage us," he said. "If they can hammer the coastal defences enough, they might be able to land. That's when the plan calls for a counter-attack; if we can hit them when they're on the beach, they might be destroyed without further ado."

He paused. "If they manage to develop a beachhead, we have a plan to fall back on a defence line and seal them off from the rest of the country. Once the reinforcements arrive, then we can evict them."

Grey nodded. "Get the preparations made now," he ordered. "Admiral Benson; you are cleared to launch the attempt to destroy the Baltic fleet."

Benson nodded. "I won't fail you," he said. "It will be done."

"I hope you're right," Grey said. "Good luck."

"One question," Sir Robert Melton, Leader of the Opposition, asked. "What do

we tell the public?”

Grey hesitated. “The truth,” he finally decided. “Robert; you should be on your way to Liverpool.”

Sir Robert shook his head. “I stand or fall beside you,” he said. “The voters would never forgive me for running.”

Grey smiled. “Can’t blame me for trying,” he said, wishing that he felt the humour he pushed into his voice. For the first time since the Global War, there was a very real chance that Britain would be invaded...and it would happen on his watch.

The *Charles de Gaulle* had carried a single E-2 Hawkeye of its own, which *Contre-Admiral* François Videzun had been careful to try to keep out of range. The *Charles de Gaulle* had been overloaded with weapons and systems, intended for the deployment to China, and most of them had been off-loaded.

Videzun smiled suddenly. Missiles that had been intended for one deployment would now be put to a far better use – in attacking Britain itself. The real problem was that the Royal Navy was stronger than the combined French fleet – and if the *George Washington* got involved, it would lead to a swift defeat. If the Royal Navy could be destroyed...then all sorts of options suddenly opened up.

“I have a communications pulse from Captain Jean-Pierre Mauroy,” Jacqueline Petal said. Her voice hadn’t been the same since the first night with the Crown Prince. Videzun felt bad about that, sometimes; the deadness in her voice was chilling. “He reports that the fleet is moving out now and heading for the British homeland.”

Videzun smiled grimly, wishing that they had a proper command centre, instead of the cobbled-together computer centre that they’d established near Brussels. The irony amused him; Brussels was hardly important in this timeline. The Netherlands, after several attempts to assert their independence, had been systematically reduced back in the time of Prime Minister Napoleon.

Still, he assured himself, it would do what he wanted it to do; coordinate a massive invasion of Britain. It was a plan that had one major flaw; the unknown factor of the *George Washington*. He’d laid his plans carefully, hoping to have

most of the invasion completed by the time the American carrier could become involved...and he'd acted to tempt the British into a killing zone.

"Good," he said. "How long until the aircraft clash with theirs?"

"Around seven minutes," a staffer said. He'd been pulled from the *Charles de Gaulle*; there had been no time to prepare anyone from the new reality. "Sir, when they enter visual range..."

"I know," Videzun snapped. He did too; if the British got a close look at the approaching bomber swarm, they might see the little surprises attached to the aircraft. He scowled; he was going to be burning up hundreds of irreplaceable weapons in the battle...but it would be worth it if they succeeded...

And if they failed, well that wasn't worth worrying about.

"Look at the bastards," the radar operator breathed. Lieutenant Alison Hayes could have rebuked him, it was far from professional, but she understood the feeling. Even knowing that none of those red icons could have possibly have harmed her craft, she still found it intimidating.

"Give me a breakdown," she snapped. The radar signal from the AWACS was going directly to the defence command at London, and through drone relay to the *George Washington*, but she wanted to look at the data herself. "How many of them are there?"

"Somewhere around two thousand," the radar operator said absently. Alison gaped at him. "There's a mixture of modern and old types, madam; some of them are newly built, others are from before we arrived. Madam, some of them are... quite large."

Alison nodded as the computers continued to break down the signals into something they could use. Several of the aircraft were around the size of a B-29, although they clearly had no jet aircraft...which was odd. Where were the forty-odd jet fighters from the *Charles de Gaulle*? Both sides had been able to tool up for propeller fighters quickly, but none of them were a threat to the F-18s...

"Madam, the Hawk Squadron is requesting permission to engage with the F-18s," the radio operator said. "Air Marshall Bentley wants your opinion."

Alison looked down at the display again. It...reminded her of something, the way that the aircraft were moving in one massive swarm, but it refused to come to her. It made sense to have the F-18s intercept; simply by flashing close to a 'modern' aircraft they could hope to take it out.

"Tell him that they have permission to intercept," she said. "Gunny, have you managed to break down the centre of the formation yet?"

"No, Madam," the radar operator said. "They're moving to confuse our radars..."

"Hawk squadron is engaging," the other operator said. His voice became a startled squeak. "Holy shit!"

Alison swept back to the display and felt her mouth drop open. The F-18s had been accelerating towards the enemy planes...which had just launched a salvo of guided missiles at them. Even as she watched, the missiles locked on to the F-18s, chasing them without mercy or regard for their desperate attempts to engage.

Radar-guided, Alison thought grimly, as chaff and flares proved useless. Seconds later, three of the four F-18s were destroyed, the fourth was badly damaged. "Pull us back," she snapped. A SAM could reach their position, even if nothing else could. "Pull us back."

"Shit," the radar operator said. "Madam..."

The French pilot cared nothing for politics; he just wanted to have the pleasure of convincing the Americans that all of their technology could be outsmarted with ease. He smiled to himself as he yanked his aircraft away from the French bomber, heading directly towards the AWACS; the Americans should have expected the technique, seeing that the French had pioneered it in Bosnia.

He triggered his afterburners and his aircraft leapt forward, already gaining on the E-2 ahead of him. It didn't take long to catch up with the unarmed aircraft; the Americans had only rarely armed their Hawkeye craft, perhaps hoping that they would be considered neutral targets. The pilot knew better than to count on it; firing his missiles from just inside their range. Seconds later, a chain of explosions destroyed the Hawkeye, sending Lieutenant Alison Hayes and her crew to their fiery deaths.

Admiral Ronald Graves, Commanding Officer of the Home Fleet, scowled as he read the note; the AWACS had been taken down. There were savage air battles being fought over Dover, but his own radar was making it clear that there were more French aircraft, hovering over Denmark and watching him.

“Order the carriers to launch a second ready flight,” he ordered, and his Commander Air Group leapt to obey. He stared out into the choppy seas and hoped that it would put the French off sailing, but he knew better than to hope for it. The French weren’t cowards and the seas weren’t *that* bad...which meant that forty-odd superdreadnaughts were somewhere within the region.

He glared across at his radar operator. “Any sign of the enemy, yet?” He demanded. One thing was clear, at least; if the French operated their own carriers, then they would be detectable from further away, simply by having a higher horizon. Still, the North Sea was a very big place and the two fleets very tiny – even his seventy-five superdreadnaughts and scouting elements would be very tiny indeed on that scale.

“None, sir,” the operator said. “Sir, there’s just the aircraft forming up over Denmark.”

Graves nodded to himself, studying the map. The discipline of hunting enemy ships was well known to the Royal Navies; a craft starting from Point A with a total speed of twenty knots will be somewhere within a circle, depending upon the time between the present and the last contact. He had worried about a submarine ambush, which was why he had the destroyers and the new sonar equipment probing for enemy submarines, but they hadn’t found anything...yet.

“Where are the bastards?” He muttered to himself, assuming a noble posture on the flag deck. Could the French have launched their ships as a diversion of some kind? If so, why? Could they be hugging the Scandinavian coast and trying to sneak past? “Where are they if they’re not here?”

“Contact,” the radar operator snapped. “I think it’s the fleet.”

Graves glanced at the cathode-ray screen and cursed. There were dozens of targets, perhaps all forty of the Baltic Fleet superdreadnaughts had come out, and they were moving to avoid a confrontation.

“Pursuit course,” he snapped, as one of the devices from the *George Washington* started to chime. He stared at it; it was blinking up a sign in some incomprehensible technobabble - FRA/RAD/0685/Y! “What’s that?”

“We just got scanned by a French radar from our world,” the operator said grimly. “They’ll know us completely sir; every ship, every...”

“Then they aren’t they running?” Graves demanded. No one in his right mind would risk forty on seventy-five, not counting the other ships. “What are they...?”

“They’re firing,” the operator said. There was a sudden chilling moment. “Sir, order the ships to move, *now!*”

Graves didn’t move fast enough. The *Charles de Gaulle* had carried one hundred anti-ship missiles, intended for use against the Chinese Navy – or possible sale to the Vietnamese Navy. They had been configured for use against the Chinese cruiser design...and eighty of them had been unleashed against the British Home Fleet. No one knew it, then or ever, but the French aircraft had been carefully plotting out targets and assigning them to the missiles, which had been mounted on land.

Two missiles struck each of the carriers, massive overkill for ships like them, vaporising them without given the crew any chance to abandon ship. The rest of the missiles spread out and slammed into superdreadnaughts, slamming through the hull and exploding within the hull. Several missiles were accidentally directed onto battlecruisers instead; twelve superdreadnaughts survived the sudden catastrophic attack.

Before any of the surviving crew could manage to coordinate a defence, or an escape, the French fleet was upon them. The battle was short, heroic...and had only one possible outcome. In the wake of the shocking defeat, the Home Fleet was no more...and France had gained naval superiority.

Chapter Thirty-Eight: Sealion

Over Britain

United Kingdom (TimeLine B)

The air was very quiet in Ten Downing Street. The final telemetry from the device on the *Britannia* had been very clear; cruise missiles had struck almost the entire fleet. The Admiralty was trying to coordinate a retreat, but radar had made it impossible for ships to escape so easily, along with the aircraft from the French carriers. Even as the War Cabinet listened, the final radio signals vanished; the defeat had not only been crushing, but decisive.

Grey took a long breath. He noticed that his hands were shaking. Part of his mind couldn't grasp why that was so; the rest of his mind was gibbering in fear. The rest of the Cabinet wasn't much better; between them, they had just presided over the largest naval defeat in history; not even the short Battle of Mexico had been so...disastrous.

Admiral Sir Martin Benson spoke with a shaky voice. "What the hell did they hit us with?" He demanded, in a voice of ashy death. He rounded on Colonel Sir Benjamin Phillips. "What have you people brought to this world?"

Sir Benjamin spoke aloud, almost speaking to himself rather than anyone in the room. "They were planning to double-cross us all along," he said. "Those were Hellebores; they couldn't have been anything else. That's why none of the *Charles de Gaulle's* manifests made any sense; they were trying to conceal that they had them."

"The Emperor meant it, I'm sure," Grey said. "It was his son..."

"No, back in our reality," Sir Benjamin said. His tone was bleak. "The French built those missiles and their warheads for use against armoured ships; they slam down on the ship from high above, punch through the armour and detonate inside. Your ships" – his voice broke off – "your ships don't have anything like an ECM suite; we never thought that we could build one in time.

"The United States Navy was investing in battleships and something new called an arsenal ship," he said. He scowled. "The French saw a gap in the market and build the Hellebores – and I bet you anything you care to put forward that what's

his name...”

“*Contre-Admiral* François Videzun,” General Sir Douglas Highlander supplied.

“I bet you that Videzun’s orders were to sell them to the Vietnamese or even the Chinese,” he said. “Neither one could hope to stand up to one of the planned battleships, but if they had weapons like the Hellebores – bloody stupid machines, so they don’t get fooled easily, and a compressed warhead that blew a hole in the middle of your ships and triggered the magazines and the stored shells inside.”

“And destroyed the Royal Navy,” Benson said. “Prime Minister, I will offer my resignation at once...”

“Sit down,” Grey snapped. “Sir Benjamin; what do you think they’ll do now?”

Sir Benjamin didn’t have to think. “Invade,” he said. “They’ll have been preparing for an invasion – and they’re beating hell out of the Royal Flying Corps.” He paused. “Shit; we assumed that the crew of the *Charles de Gaulle* would be sparing with their own weapons, but if they’re not...sir, you have to turn off the radar stations.”

Highlander gaped at him. “Why?” He demanded. “If we do that, we’ll be blind!”

“We’ll be blind anyway when they start firing HARM missiles at you,” Sir Benjamin snapped. “The RFC is in serious trouble – and it will only get worse when the radar stations are taken down.” He paused, thinking. “In fact, have as many radios as you can transmitting; perhaps we can convince them to waste anti-radiation missiles on the harmless signals.”

Grey tapped the table. “Have the full invasion alert sounded,” he snapped. “Invasion expected soon, perhaps today.”

“It will be at least two weeks, perhaps three, for any reinforcements to arrive,” Benson said. His tone was broken; his voice had broken along with his fleet. He looked up, a glimmer of hope in his eyes. “Unless the *George Washington* comes alone.”

Under other circumstances, Grey would have smiled at the irony. “The carrier will come with the rest of the fleet,” he said. “We will only have one chance. Tell me, can the *Washington*’s weapons inflict similar damage on the French Navy?”

Sir Benjamin hesitated. "I'm not a naval expert," he said. "I believe that the *Washington* carries some air-deployed anti-ship weapons, but I don't know if they will have the same effect. They can take out the carriers, though, perhaps even the *Charles de Gaulle* itself if they expose it to combat. Then *our* carriers can sink the fleet, assuming it tries to fight."

Grey nodded. "Adam," he said, turning to the American representative, "please would you brief Prime Minister Lord Roger Adams and the American Parliament. Remind them...that the Empire stands and falls as a united entity."

Grovetown's eyes shadowed. "You'll have all the support I can provide," he promised. "I just hope that it gets here in time."

A telephone rang. General Sir Douglas Highlander picked it up and listened. His face turned greyer under his moustache as he listened. "We just lost three of the radar stations," he said. "At last contact, Dover and the defences further east were bombed heavily."

"They've learned how to tactical bomb," Sir Benjamin said. "Have all of the radar stations turned off, sir; they're defenceless."

Highlander nodded. "With your permission," he said to Grey, who nodded helplessly. "I'll see to it now."

Sir Benjamin watched as he left. "Prime Minister, I respectfully request the right to join the defending forces," he said. "I have experience with some of the new weapons."

Grey nodded slowly. "If we'd moved faster on building tanks here, would we have more than we do?" He asked. "Perhaps if we'd built more of the weapons, perhaps even the ones that were forbidden...with good reason, would this have been averted?"

Sir Benjamin took a breath. "This is their last chance," he said, and shuddered. Admiral Jackson, he knew from their last discussion, had been astonished at the willingness of the...ruling powers to call the war a draw, but the enemy - *Contre-Admiral* François Videzun - knew better than they did. No, that wasn't right; he came from a different culture, one that had learnt the 'victory at all costs - or fight again later' discipline.

"If they hold here, we are at a disadvantage in the peace talks," he said, and knew

that there wouldn't be any. Videzun would know better; would the Crown Prince agree with him? "If we can beat them, then we can hold out for a better deal in the peace talks."

Grey looked up at him. "I hope you're right," he said. "Go; take your command, and good luck."

Videzun stared down at the display, almost unable to believe his own eyes. The effect of the Hellebore missiles had been exactly as promised, even if some of the aiming had been...insufficient. He smiled; given what they'd had to work with, perfection was probably impossible.

"I just proved the concept," he gloated, and smiled to himself. He would never be able to report home, of course, but it was good to know that the American technology had been bettered in more ways than one. They clearly hadn't bothered to inform their clients that the Hellebore missiles existed, let alone warned them that they might be used against the Royal Navy. The success rate had been...awesome.

If I'd fired them off in the middle of the original task force, I could have sunk it all, he thought. The missiles had been intended for Vietnam, to give them some extra firepower – and France some extra influence – but he'd put them to far better use here. It wasn't the only item that was being used; French-built Dassault Rafale aircraft had launched precision attacks against a handful of British targets.

"A pity they removed the Super Étendards," he muttered, as he glanced down at the display. As the RFC went blind, he dared to order his own radar plane closer, wishing that the *Charles de Gaulle* had carried an in-flight refuelling capability. It had been planned – and the *George Washington* had such a capability – but it hadn't been developed until it was too late for the *Charles de Gaulle's* final refit.

"They're wanting to know if they can begin the invasion," Jacqueline Petal said. She tapped the landline system; Videzun had had high hopes for developing some kind of fibre-optic system, but that had proven impossible in the time they'd had. "The aircraft have scored a number of direct hits on British targets and the RFC is losing the fight..."

Videzun considered. It was the beginnings of the afternoon. Just enough time to land a major force. "Order them to...land the landing force," he said. "Let's see

how quickly we can land an entire force...”

Captain LeFay knew little about the changes within his own country, but he knew his duty. The four older dreadnaughts of the Brest Squadron, which had been trapped in port for over a year, were finally free to move as they pleased...even though he discounted the story about how many British ships had been sunk.

“Steady as she goes,” he ordered, as he peered ahead towards the coast of Britain. He’d been promised fighter support, but he knew better than to believe that it was possible, even with the recent developments in carrier-borne aircraft. Everything had gotten a great deal more dangerous for the French Navy recently – it felt good to strike back.

“Aye, sir,” the helmsman said. The Brest Squadron didn’t even rate a real commander; four dreadnaughts weren’t a very important command except...here they might be decisive. “Moving up the channel.”

LeFay smiled as the white cliffs appeared ahead of them. Portsmouth, he knew from the intelligence briefing, was heavily protected and attempting to land directly in a port was suicide. Sevastopol had proven that, even though the follow-up landings outside the city had been a success. He’d kept the *Oran* and its companions out of range of the heavy guns, just in case; discovering that the British were in no mood to be trifled with would have ruined his day.

He glanced up sharply as one of the strange futuristic aircraft swept across the sky, and then relaxed as he realised that it was one of the French aircraft. Time was passing rapidly – could his ship not move any further? Bangs and cracks echoed across the water as the monstrous air battle raged on, out of sight, but hardly out of mind.

“That’s Dover, sir,” the navigator said. A series of flickers appeared on the shoreline; seconds’ later massive gouts of water blasted up from nearby as shells hit the water. “Sir, they’re attacking us.”

“I *had* noticed,” LeFay said, too pleased to be annoyed at the stupid comment. He lifted the intercom and muttered one single command into it. “Open fire,” he ordered. Seconds later, the *Oran* shuddered as it unleashed its main guns on the landing zone, hammering the British defences at short range.

“Firing,” the gunnery officer said. The system of coordinating the fire from all of the turrets was a new innovation, one from the *Charles de Gaulle*, but it worked. “Sir, we’re pasting them.”

“Keep firing until we run out of shells,” LeFay ordered. “I want there to be nothing left between Dover and Folkestone. The troops are going to land there and get all of the glory, but we are going to clear the way for them.”

Sir Benjamin threw himself to the ground as the first shells impacted near the defences on the beach, detonating mines and shattering lives with ease. The ground heaved as the heavy guns returned fire, bracketing the French ships, then there was a thunderous explosion far too close for comfort.

“They’re hammering us, guv,” a man shouted. Sir Benjamin took moments to make him out through his ringing ears – and knew that it wouldn’t be enough. Cursing the loss of any serious radar coverage, he carefully pulled himself to his knees and lifted his binoculars. He cursed again; one of the French battleships was burning, but the others were still pouring fire into the British defences.

“I’d never have guessed,” he snapped. “What do we have left?”

“I dunno, guv,” the man snapped. “They’re killing everyone...”

Another thunderous explosion cut his words off as one French gunner got lucky, triggering the stored shells in a bunker. The explosion literally blew the gun into the water, tearing a hole in the defences. Perhaps unaware of their success, the French continued to pour shells over what Sir Benjamin was starting to realise was their landing zone.

D-Day, he realised. *We made a mistake; this is not Sealion, but D-Day.*

“Where are the fucking landlines?” He snapped. The man couldn’t hear him; his ears were clearly broken too. Sir Benjamin shook him and shouted right in his face. “Where are the landlines?”

“Cut,” the man snapped back. “The shelling has cut the lines.”

Or perhaps one of their precision bombs, Sir Benjamin thought coldly. *So this is what it felt like in Iraq.* He forced down the sudden unexpected feeling of

sympathy, concentrating on the here and now. The shelling stopped suddenly; the French ships were just holding position. Other ships could be seen, moving up the channel, defying the British by the mere power of their presence.

Superdreadnaughts, he thought coldly. The handful of remaining guns opened fire on them...and all hell broke loose. The superdreadnaughts were firing madly, aiming their guns higher than necessary, and then Sir Benjamin realised why. Darting in among the superdreadnaughts, crossing directly from the French coast, were thousands of small landing craft. Somehow, he'd expected barges, but these were proper landing craft.

The man grabbed his arm. "Guv, what the hell is that?"

Sir Benjamin swung around, to see a helicopter – two helicopters – heading over from France. He scowled; they had nothing capable of taking one out...and their presence meant that air support could be sent whenever the French troops needed them.

"Invasion," he said simply. "Where is the closest landline?"

The man shook his head, clearly unaware of the fact. Sir Benjamin cursed and started to gather his men; after the bombardment there were only a handful left. "We'll hold them as long as we can," he said, "and then retreat in good order."

"Yes, sir," the senior sergeant said. His Scottish accent was somehow stronger than any from TimeLine A. "Sir, what about Dover?"

Sir Benjamin shuddered. Dover had several regiments and the militia dug in. "They'll have to take care of themselves," he said. "Stand by to resist" – the word stuck in his throat – "invasion."

Andre Arsenault had had a better view of the invasion than perhaps anyone else; the overrated Rafale would not have seen anything like as much as he did. The gathered ships in the Channel, the massive fleet of landing craft, barges, passenger ships, transports and other vessels, the massive explosions on the British mainland as the French Navy poured fire into the shoreline...and so much else. Aircraft swooped overhead, RFC and French aircraft fighting it out for dominance.

I'm glad I'm just a helicopter pilot, he thought, as he swept towards the shore.

The weapons on the helicopter were already ready, along with the twenty-one man assault team he and his fellow pilot were carrying. The helicopter carried fewer weapons and only one pilot – not something he was comfortable with – but it was the only way to get troops on shore in time to...

BOOM! An explosion, far too close for comfort, battered the helicopter. He heard the men in the rear becoming sick and shuddered at the thought of cleaning up the mess, even though he knew that it was probably unavoidable. A single British gun was trying to hit him, using shells designed for timed detonation.

“Die, you bastard,” he snapped, firing a long burst down at the gunner. The gun exploded, hopefully killing the gunner – Arsenault had no time to check. The helicopter settled to the ground as its companion circled around, watching for British soldiers. The flat grassland looked harmless, but two years of fighting homicidal fanatics had taught him never to take anything at face value.

“Everyone out,” he snapped, as the helicopter’s hatch snapped open. “Move it, now!”

“Move it, you bastards,” the leader snapped, and the troops leapt out. Arsenault didn’t wait; as soon as they were all out he launched himself back into the air, watching for British aircraft. He swept once around the landing zone, then cleared the second helicopter to land.

“A good days work, I think,” he said. “Can we go home now?”

He listened to the answer on the radio. Instead of flying back to France, they were to continue giving ground support to the French. Arsenault cursed; many of them would probably take them for British aircraft and fire on them. Ever since the Falklands, rumour had given the British supernatural abilities.

He laughed suddenly. “Don’t worry chaps,” he said. “You have your own wizards now, eh?”

The moment that the helicopters appeared, and evaded all attempts to shoot them down, Sir Benjamin knew that the battle for the beachhead had been won - by the French. Without any way of calling down fire on the French positions, which would lead to the heavy gunners being exposed to French counter-fire and aerial attack, the French would have all the time in the world to land their forces and

prepare their positions.

“We have to move from here,” he snapped. The small team he had, which was doing the best they could by firing their machine gun into the masses of troops, stared at him. “We have to move...”

“Dragonfly,” one of the men interrupted, as a French helicopter swooped down on them. The man didn’t hesitate; he fired madly at the helicopter, which started to fire back...before being consumed in a ball of fire. Sir Benjamin let out a sigh of relief as he realised that he was still alive – he’d expected that the aircraft would crash on top of their position - before remembering that the French had other weapons.

“Move, now,” he snapped, and led the men away from their position. The French troops were moving now, heading away from the beaches – countless targets being missed because he had no way to contact any artillery that might have been emplaced to the east. “Move it!”

The men obeyed and ran east. They had had the contingency plan – head east until meeting the main defence line – hammered into their heads, and yet...they didn’t want to run. Sir Benjamin didn’t give them time to worry, forcing them forward with all of his remaining strength, knowing that for the first time since never, a major French force had established a beachhead on British soil.

This could get dicey, he thought grimly, and ran faster.

Chapter Thirty-Nine: Hold the Line!

George Washington

Nr New Orleans, North American Union (TimeLine B)

The war map on the wall had been designed to display all of the radar contacts from a global network of satellites, sensors, radar stations and passive systems, tracking everything that might have been of importance to the Admiral commanding the task force. In Timeline B, it was just a glorified map; half of the names were even incorrect – for they hadn't existed in this new world.

The room was deadly quiet – and perhaps the only secure space in the North American Union. The press had reported upon the invasion, but without much detail; the censors had gone to work at once. It helped that very little was actually *known*; the day had gone by without anyone managing to pull together a coherent picture of the invasion and the situation.

Admiral Jackson sighed. He didn't need this problem, not now, not with reports of an agent for an unknown power operating on board the *Washington*. He'd called most of the crew back to serve on board the *Washington*, along with the Royal North American Navy, but no one knew what the Navy was going to do. Rumours were everywhere; the Royal North American Navy was going to attack France directly, or even launch an invasion of Scandinavia.

Admiral Sir Joseph Porter coughed as he spoke grimly. He'd arrived with a folder and Admiral Anderson, discussing the situation in a hushed voice. He'd asked permission to hold the main meeting on the *Washington* itself and Morrigan – at Jackson's request – had agreed.

"The Royal Navy has been more or less wiped out," Sir Joseph said flatly. There was a long moment of absolute silence. Jackson, who'd suspected as much from the final telemetry, winced. "The missiles that were deployed against the fleet destroyed or damaged enough ships to prevent Home Fleet from escaping the French Baltic Fleet – or to defeat it. In effect, the French have control of Home Waters."

There was a shudder running through the entire room. Jackson frowned, then realised that it wasn't out of place at all. So too would an American from Timeline A wince at the loss of *Washington*, even though he might have come

from Dixie. These people knew that their King-Emperor, the Imperial Parliament and much of the bureaucracy that kept the United Empire running was at risk from the French invasion.

And we're not used to thinking of the French as competent, Jackson thought coldly, and scowled. *These* French had never been defeated in three world wars, never learned the lessons without the final lesson, never realised that in the end wars only made some people miserable. *These* French knew that they were a match for the Royal Navy...and had proved it spectacularly.

“They have not been slow to exploit their success,” Sir Joseph said. He tapped the map. Under normal circumstances, it would have followed his voice, but without the massive amounts of input it just stayed blank. “They have managed a major landing yesterday, in two separate places.”

Jackson frowned. It made sense, he supposed, particularly given French superiority in numbers. Having two angles of attack would force the British to split their defences and defeat both of them – a land version of the trick that had destroyed the Royal Navy by drawing it out into the open. He shook his head slowly; unless the French had somehow built a nuclear weapon, there was no way to repeat the trick.

Sir Joseph parsed out the locations on the map. “The first attack landed near Dover, yesterday,” he said. “The landing was in early afternoon and was supported by their fleet and a number of the aircraft from the *Charles de Gaulle*. After several hours of heavy fighting, a general retreat to the main defence line was called and our units withdrew in good order. Several French tanks were destroyed by bazooka weapons, convincing them to hold back.

“Dover itself is still holding out,” he continued. “The French have shown themselves willing to seal the city off rather than take the casualties involved in trying to take the city. Their superdreadnaughts have threatened bombardment, but Mayor Canns has refused to surrender and so far the French have held back the threatened bombardment.

“To add to our woes, however, a second invasion force landed near Yarmouth, heading to secure all of the region,” he concluded. “Norwich itself has fallen to an attack, but the militia gave a good account of itself despite not having any antitank weapons. By the time they retreated, this time in very bad order” – his face darkened – “the French had started to dig in themselves.”

There was a single cough in the room. The rest was silence. “For the moment, the French are concentrating on reinforcing their landings,” Sir Joseph said. “They’ve been moving troops in over the last day, and they’ve been expanding their area of control. It won’t be long, however, until they feel strong enough to advance against London – and then all hell will be out for noon.”

He must have picked that expression up from us, Jackson thought absently.

Sir Joseph looked around the room. Many of the faces were pale, others were shaking with rage. Anderson, Jackson saw, was furious. The American was going to marry a girl from Ireland, after all, and the Irish would be next on the list if Britain fell. Jackson thought rapidly; could they defeat the French Navy? If they could, what would the price be?

Sir Joseph looked at Jackson for a long moment. “It has been decided, by the North American Parliament, that the Royal North American Navy will sail to relieve Britain at once,” he said. “Unfortunately, that means that the French will have a greater margin of superiority than I am comfortable with.”

He nodded to his assistant, a scrawny man with a prune-like face. Jackson concentrated, trying to remember his name, and finally succeeded. Morley. Jacob Morley. Morley stepped forward, into the light, and attracted the attention of the assembled Admirals, Commodores and Captains.

“The entire French Navy in European waters numbers some seventy to eighty superdreadnaughts and dreadnaughts,” Morley said. “With the...reduction of Home Fleet, we will be outmatched thirty-five to seventy, at best. That, I hesitate to mention, was the same as the margin of superiority Home Fleet expected to face when confronting the Baltic Fleet.”

He paused. “We have to somehow defeat that force,” he said.

Anderson spoke into the silence. “There is also the danger of them transiting forces through the canal from the Pacific and stabbing us in the back,” he said.

Sir Joseph shook his head. “There are too many aircraft and submarines around to risk that,” he said. He spoke to the room at large. “I’m sure I don’t have to remind you of what’s at stake here,” he said. “If Britain falls, then we will face a long and very costly campaign to get it back.”

Morley paused. “Our aircraft carriers are the only ships that can hope to deal with

the French,” he said. “Except for the unknown factor of the *Charles de Gaulle*, of course.”

Jackson nodded slowly. The *George Washington* could have made it to England quicker than the coal-powered ships of the Royal North American Navy, but at the price of facing the French alone. It would have been simple if it was just the *Charles de Gaulle*, of course, but the French were already proving themselves to be every bit as cunning as...well, the British.

Sir Joseph nodded. “It has been decided that Admiral Anderson will command the force,” he said. Jackson nodded; the United Empire’s politics normally dictated that the dominion providing the most ships would hold the command. Not always, but most of the time. “Admiral Jackson will be his second.”

There was a rustle running through the room. It was a test, Jackson realised; both of their willingness to accept someone with no seniority in any of the Royal Navies – and of his willingness to accept the subordinate command. He nodded once, slowly, not trusting himself to speak.

“Thank you,” Sir Joseph said. “Gentlemen; Admiral Anderson will have the task of defining the battle plan. Good luck to you all.”

“That always sounds like passing the buck to me,” Jackson commented, as Anderson and himself relaxed in his stateroom. “If Sir Joseph isn’t willing to offer suggestions...”

“Oh, he will,” Anderson said. “The Royal Navies just place a lot of trust in the officer on the spot, as you people say.”

Jackson smiled wryly. “I wish my people acted the same way,” he said. “Take my word for it; once you have a modern telecommunications infrastructure, you’ll have officers making unhelpful remarks for every little decision you have to make.”

Anderson smiled into his glass. “You like it here, don’t you?” He asked. “Would you go home if you could?”

Jackson was honest enough to admit it to himself. “I don’t know,” he said. “This world is so much more decent than mine, although it won’t stay that way.”

Anderson laughed, then sobered. “One question,” he said. “Admiral; can your missiles do the same as theirs?”

“We don’t have any Hellebores,” Jackson said grimly. “God alone knows why the French bothered to have them on the *Charles de Gaulle*.” A nasty thought flickered at the corner of his mind, but he dismissed it; it didn’t matter now anyway. “Our cruise missiles will mess up a superdreadnaught, mainly by taking out the bridge, but not the same level of total destruction.”

He grinned suddenly. “On the other hand, we can take out their carriers pretty easily, and then...your planes can go into action.”

“I was worried about that,” Anderson admitted. “Their carriers seem to be more configured for air defence and scouting.”

“Don’t place too much faith in spies,” Jackson advised. “Remind me to tell you about the Chinese plan to build their own battleship sometime.”

“I won’t ask,” Anderson said. “So...we destroy their carriers, then hammer away at their fleet until it quits?”

Jackson smiled. It didn’t touch his eyes. “Sounds like a plan,” he said. “Tell me; do you think that the British – the defenders of Britain – can hold out for the two to three weeks it will take to get there?”

Anderson refused to meet his eyes. “I don’t think so,” he admitted. “They won’t be able to reach Scotland, but I would place money on them having taken London. They’re flooding supplies in now, despite our submarines. The *Charles de Gaulle* seems to be operating with their fleet, using its ASW technology to hunt down our subs.”

Jackson looked up sharply. “The *Charles de Gaulle* is operating with their fleet?” He demanded. “That could be...bad.”

Anderson blinked. “How?” He asked. “I thought you said that your ship could sink it.”

“In a straight battle, yes,” Jackson said. “In a melee, with those damned missiles of theirs...it could get unpleasant. I’m not worried about the *Washington*, but if that frog bastard knows anything, he’ll aim at your carriers. Those fighters of his can launch the missiles.”

“Hell,” Anderson said, with great feeling. “Your fighters can cover us, can’t they?”

“Yes, but it will get dicey,” Jackson said. He smiled. “A fight to the death, carrier to carrier...”

Anderson smiled. “Back to the point at hand,” he said. “What do we do if London has fallen?”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” Jackson said. “We’re going to have to bring some of the New Model Army with us, in transports like the ones you had back when we first met.” He remembered that day and smiled. “And if we do that, we’re going to have to cover them as well as challenge the French fleet.”

“They could go to Iceland,” Anderson suggested. “Once we defeat the French, we can pick up the transports and invade Britain again. Hell, the Irish will be preparing some armies anyway.”

Jackson thought about the alternate Ireland, which seemed unable to resolve the religious divide, and frowned to himself. “Yes,” he said, and hoped that Anderson was right. “Now, I think we’d better get to work.”

Anderson nodded. “I’m still going to be on the *Amherst*,” he said. “I’ll just outline the plan to Sir Joseph, and then get back on board.”

Jackson smiled. “I think you’d better go see Maggie first,” he said. “She’s come on board to follow the trail of a story.”

He smiled at Anderson’s sudden anguish. “Poor Lieutenant Han Wushi is trying to handle the press now,” he said. “Go save him from her.”

Maggie had never been sure of the exact moment when she realised that she had strong feelings for Admiral Anderson. What she was sure of was that kissing him felt *right*, in ways that touching herself or even thinking about a one-night stand – to use her friend Sharon’s term – didn’t feel right. As she wrapped herself into his body, her lips meeting his for a very un-decorous kiss, she felt his tension in every line of his body.

“I love you,” she breathed, and knew that she meant it. “Felix...”

“I know,” he said softly, and led her out of the cabin into the corridor. After nearly six months, he’d become as experienced with the *Washington* as any regular guest to the ship could be; finding a vacant cabin was easy. Maggie lifted an eyebrow as he closed the door, leaving them both alone together.

“Shouldn’t there be a chaperone?” She asked, lilting her voice to indicate if *now* was the time to take their relationship to an all-new level, she wouldn’t object for more than form’s sake. “Who knows what the neighbours will think?”

“Balls to them,” Anderson said rudely, a sentiment right out of her own heart. She half-wondered if she was supposed to undress, but she was sure that men didn’t pace around nervously when considering sex. “Maggie...what are you thinking?”

Maggie blinked. “About what?” She asked. “About us, now?”

He blushed. He’d been so worried about...whatever he was worried about that he hadn’t even thought about how it must have looked to her. He coughed, embarrassed, and she let him off easily.

“Maggie, are you really coming with the fleet?” He asked. “Maggie...”

“I’m a reporter,” Maggie said, feeling a curious mixture of emotions. She was pleased that he cared enough to care; angry that he was thinking about stopping her. They weren’t married *yet*, for God’s sake. “I have to go where the story goes...”

“You’re my fiancée,” Anderson said. She read his worry and concern in every line of his body. “Do you have any idea what’s happened?”

“Britain has been invaded,” Maggie said. She’d picked that much up from Lieutenant Han Wushi. “Felix, I do understand...”

“No, you don’t,” Anderson snapped. The sudden tone of fear in his voice, fear not for himself, but for her, shocked her. “Maggie, the Home Fleet has been wiped out!”

Maggie felt herself stagger. Home Fleet was the most powerful force in the world; she’d been taught that at school. The finest naval commanders, the ones who history remembered, had served in Home Fleet. “No,” she said. “It can’t have been destroyed.”

“It was,” Anderson said. “Maggie, the defeat was almost total; only a handful of ships survived. Maggie – my force could face the same fate.”

Maggie clutched him to her in a reflex that was as old as time itself. “I won’t let you go,” she said, with more emotion than logic. “Felix.”

Anderson held her closely. “Maggie...I won’t lie to you,” he said. “If everything goes bad, the Royal North American Navy could meet the same fate. If that happens” – he squeezed her tightly – “I don’t want you hurt too.”

Maggie shook her head. “When I go, I go with you,” she said. “I won’t lose you now.”

Anderson hesitated. “Tell you what,” he said. “You can come, but only if you travel on the *Washington*.”

Maggie stuck out her tongue defiantly. “And what will you do if I don’t?” She asked mischievously. “Put me over your knee and spank me?”

Anderson blinked at her. The blink turned into a giggle; the giggle turned into a laugh. “I just might,” he said, and kissed her. “Seriously...”

Maggie nodded. “You’re the first man to care that much,” she said, exposing all of her heart. “Felix, you had better survive this, or I’ll kill you myself.”

Anderson reached out and swatted her on the rump. “I promise,” he said. “Now, come on; we have to ask Admiral Jackson if you can stay on the ship.”

Maggie, feeling oddly disappointed, took one look back at the bed in the cabin, and then followed him out. As they walked, they held hands, trying to take as much of each other as they could before the ship left New Orleans...perhaps for its final voyage.

Admiral Jackson watched as New Orleans disappeared into the distance. The carrier had been prepared for combat as best as they could, but he knew that it wasn’t ready. Some of the crew had been too far away to recover, and others were in England already. In the long run, he knew, it wouldn’t matter that much to the United Empire if the *George Washington* was lost; there was no way that the French could invade enough of America to really matter, or to force the war to

end.

But, for the moment, them holding Britain would be a disaster. Jackson stared down at the map; it reminded him of something, something he'd seen in a book, a long time ago. *Risk*, he remembered; he'd played Risk as a child. The map of the second Earth, Timeline B, reminded him of a vast game of Risk.

Too simple, he thought. *Is that the motive of the UFOs? Of the Alien Space Bats? Is all this just a game?*

He sighed. He knew now that the mystery agent on board wasn't French. There was no way that such an agent could cause the strange...semi-transmissions they'd been picking up. Only sheer luck had allowed them to catch on to the agent...and the scientists – such as they had – still had no idea how the transmissions were actually being made. Jackson was confident that they would work it out eventually, just through observing the effects, but the physics base of Timeline B wasn't anything like as developed as Timeline A.

He shook his head slowly. There was one thing he hadn't told anyone, except Captain Morrigan; he knew who the agent was, who it had to be. In the long run, there was only one possible suspect...

Chapter Forty: The Road to London

London/Maidstone/Dover

United Kingdom, Timeline B

General Leblanc knew, without false modesty, that he was the most capable general France had, particularly when it came to the new style of warfare. He had been involved with absorbing the lessons of the alternate world from the moment that the *Charles de Gaulle* had arrived, and he had been developing the tactics that could be adapted to the French Army.

He also knew that he had been very lucky not to be sacked over losing the battles in Poland. No one, not even the crew of the *Charles de Gaulle*, could have known that the Russians had ships of their own – but they should at least have expected it. At least, they should have considered the possibility...but they hadn't. They'd been blinded by the Russians being careful – and paranoid; they'd completely missed on the clues that they had seen, until it was too late.

He smiled suddenly as he stared down at a map of Britain. It hadn't destroyed his career – and if he was honest with himself he would have to admit that it was because of the Emperor's collapse that he remained in his post. Instead, he'd been appointed to command the invasion force for England, at least the southern force. Technically, he was the commander of both forces, but he fully expected that communications problems would prevent him from exercising full control.

Still...

He looked down at the display from the *Charles de Gaulle* and smiled, feeling like a God. The jury-rigged device was prone to sudden seizures – they called it a 'crash' – and it was nowhere near as capable as the unit on the carrier itself, but it was so much better than anything they'd had before that everyone was delighted. After carefully expanding the production of small radios, they could track each and every one of their aircraft in the sky – and could safely assume that anything without such a transmitter was a British aircraft.

"My General, the scouts have located the front lines of the British defences," his aide said, holding a radio. Tactical communications, General Leblanc was certain, could and would be intercepted by the British, but it would take them time to act on the new information. He watched as the aide sketched out the line on the map;

it was decision-making time.

“I see,” he mused, almost wishing that some other general had been appointed. One formidable British line had been established near Maidstone, running around London to defend the capital city itself. A second line ran between their positions and Southampton, which was using its heavy weapons to hammer any French ship that got too close.

“We have been urged to move by His Highness, the Crown Prince,” the aide reminded him. Hardly any of the three days General Leblanc had spent bringing supplies onto British soil had passed without the Crown Prince urging him onwards to glory. He scowled; if their logistics failed them, which was a possibility with the *George Washington* heading to Britain with most of the Royal North American Navy with it, then they would be heading onwards to bloody defeat.

“Oddly enough, I know that,” he snapped. So far, the British had refused to counterattack; something he’d hoped for, and then prayed for. They could have broken a British counterattack and then counter-counterattacked. The thought of the thousands of British soldiers impaling themselves on his guns was appealing. Instead...

He glared down at the map. It was perhaps a promising sign, the British refusal to counterattack, or perhaps it was a sign that the British expected to regain control of the seas. With the devastation inflicted on Kent and the surrounding counties, there would be no hope of living off the land; the refugees had already fled from the French lines.

He smiled suddenly. The British were not Russians, or Arabs, or even Prussians. He’d executed two men for rape and one more for pillaging, but he had a grim suspicion that he would have to order large-scale pillaging...if the French Navy lost control of the seas.

“We’ll have to attack London,” he said, and started to move units around the map in his mind. “Perhaps if we order three battalions of infantry, including the anti-tank units, to deploy as a holding force, they can prevent any counterattack from Southampton.”

He smiled. These days, no one would dream of launching an attack without land ironclads leading the way. “In the meantime, have *our* combined arms units” – another idea borrowed from the new knowledge of war – “moved up to prepare to

launch the main offensive.”

“It will be done, My General,” the aide said. “What about the artillery? The aircraft?”

General Leblanc allowed himself a moment to think. Without the aircraft from the *Charles de Gaulle*, they would have to rely on their own aircraft, which were enthusiastic, but nowhere near as tactical as the *Charles de Gaulle’s* aircraft. He considered, briefly, asking *Contre-Admiral* François Videzun for the use of some of the *Charles de Gaulle’s* aircraft, but he knew that Videzun would not agree. With the *George Washington* heading their way, each and every one of those aircraft would be needed.

“A ten-minute bombardment,” he said finally. A thought struck him. “Twenty minutes before we launch the attack, I think that we should bombard Southampton’s defences, in the standard manner.”

“To try to convince them that Southampton is the target?” The aide said. “My General, how much can they do to prepare for our attack in twenty minutes?”

General Leblanc smiled darkly. “They can get into their defensive positions,” he said. “At the same time, the troops from London will be moving into their own positions, either to support Southampton or to attack us directly. They’ll be out in the open...”

He let his voice trail off suggestively. “And then they’ll be slaughtered,” the aide said. “My General, it shall be done!”

He bounced off, every bit as enthusiastic as General Leblanc had been, before seeing war for the first time. He shrugged and snapped his fingers; the aircraft liaison officer ran up to him and saluted at once.

“Have the aircraft squadrons prepared for a major aerial attack,” he said. The aircraft liaison officer bowed; he was Italian and clearly delighted at his job. “Fighters are to cover us and attack their fighters; bombers are to hammer their airfields and targets designated by me.”

“Yes, My General,” the aircraft liaison officer said. “I’ll see to it at once.”

“See that you do,” General Leblanc said, returning to the map. It wouldn’t be long before the attack could go in...and then the British would find out what war truly

was like in the brave new world.

Thirty miles to the east, Colonel Sir Benjamin Phillips was reminded, for reasons he didn't fully understand, of the *War of the Worlds*. The novel, of course; none of the films had come close to catching the magic of the story. *This* Britain, he was starting to understand, had more in common with Victorian Britain – a joke since Victoria had never come to the throne in Timeline B – than it had to his own Britain. One advantage was that it had a far better railway system; the railways actually did run on time.

The disadvantage, however, was that the farmers and workers in the occupied regions were almost unarmed, which meant that what resistance there was to the French was limited. He didn't fully understand it, not in this world where invasion was clearly a realistic possibility, but he cursed it – even though many farmers were also members of the Militia.

"It won't be long now," General Sir Douglas Highlander said, as he peered into the British hedgerows, looking towards territory occupied by the French. For the last couple of days, as the defence line was being assembled and built, smoke had been rising from the occupied zone, but now the skies were clear. Unrealistically clear – which suggested that the French or the remaining local inhabitants were putting the fires out.

"I guess not," Sir Benjamin said. He paused and smiled as encouragingly as he could as a new section of troops from the Militia arrived, looking grim and tired. He recognised their rank badges; they were from Cambridge. There were nearly ten regular divisions and fifteen militia divisions in the line...and he knew that they might not be enough.

"There," Highlander said, as a green flare flashed in the sky ahead of them. He blew a whistle as loud as he could, the sign for 'get down,' and drove into a trench. Sir Benjamin followed him, seconds before the first hail of shells crashed near them. Explosions and secondary explosions shattered the peace of the dawn, blasting through the men who hadn't ducked fast enough. A runner, trying desperately to reach the commanding officers, was cut down and thrown into one of the trenches; Sir Benjamin crawled to him and took the message from his dead hands.

"They're about to attack Southampton," he screamed, trying to make himself

heard. It wasn't likely, he knew, that they would be able to move any forces from London – and he was fairly certain that they shouldn't do anything hasty until they knew for sure what was happening. “General...”

“Fuck that,” Highlander said. “I don't believe it, not with the shells they're pouring on us here.”

Sir Benjamin nodded. He rather agreed with his commander, even as the first aircraft roared overhead, heading towards London. Anti-aircraft guns opened fire on them, trying to wipe them from the sky, but none of them succeeded in hitting anything. The hail of shellfire was becoming almost normal, almost tolerable... and then it stopped altogether. The silence was deafening.

“We're alive,” he said, stunned. It had never been anything like that bad on the New Spain Front; he'd never felt the sheer power of the weapons he'd unleashed. “I don't believe it.”

Highlander shook his head. “Stay down,” he advised, then shouted for people to stand by to run to their defence positions. “They might be hoping that we'll think it's over and come out, or...”

Sir Benjamin blinked. “Or?”

“Or they might be launching an attack,” Highlander said. He peered into the distance. “Ah.”

“Ah is never good,” Sir Benjamin said, as Highlander started to bark orders. In the distance, the distinctive shape of French tanks could be seen, accompanied by infantry wearing a brilliant green. *Robin Hood*, Sir Benjamin thought, rudely. “What are they?”

“The Irish Bastards,” Highlander said. He scowled. “They are renowned for their savagery and for their hatred of us British, particularly the English.” He cursed once, hard. “They must be sure of victory,” he said. “The sort of atrocities those bastards commit would give us the legal right – indeed the duty – to execute the lot of them.”

Sergeant Killarney had never been to Ireland, even in the days of peace. Like his fellow Irish Bastards, he was descended from a tribe composed of survivors from

the Global War and the women they'd married. He'd imbibed hatred of the English along with his mother's milk, even though he'd never met a real Irishman. Ironically, he resembled a Frenchman more than an Irishman; his mother and *her* mother had been French.

He stepped back as the land ironclad moved onwards, feeling that hatred burning in his breast. The men of the small Irish Colony were raised to consider the English as their eternal enemy, something that had kept them out of most of the fighting. The regiment had lost two men for raping an Englishwomen – and they had their anger to burn off.

"There," he snarled, as tiny puffs of smoke could be seen. The English weren't wasting bullets by firing at the land ironclads; they were firing at his men! He threw himself to the ground as a bullet cracked over his head, then crawled forward behind the ironclad, which was pouring machine gun fire into the British position.

"Die, you *bastard*," he shouted, as they reached the edge of the trench. The scene was bad enough to make even him slow down for a moment; the ironclad had utterly ripped the British defenders apart. The ironclad itself seemed to be... struck; the side of the trench had crumbled under its weight. Even as he watched, the ironclad fell forward, into the trench.

"Bastards," he screamed, as several other ironclads met the same fate. The British had taken one hell of a risk – or perhaps it was the effect of the shellfire; the rear side of the trenches had been weakened, just enough to make it crumble when an ironclad moved across it.

"Working crew, now," a French captain snapped. Killarney knew better than to disobey, he joined the captain in assisting three of the five ironclads out of the hole, before helping them to...

A missile streaked past him and struck the ironclad, which exploded. Killarney threw himself to the ground as the British launched a counterattack, throwing a horde of green-garbed soldiers of their own into the mix. The savage battle destroyed the ironclads...and then the British withdrew in good order.

"After them," Killarney howled, and the Bastards leapt to obey. The French captain shouted at them, but they gloried in their reputation as ungovernable; they ignored him and chased the British.

“They can’t go far,” one of his men snapped, and then Killarney – too late – saw the trap. The British had built a second line of defences, and he and his men had just run directly into the trap. A hail of machine gun fire cut Killarney and his men down before they could run for their lives.

Sir Benjamin watched grimly as two fighters fought it out in the air. Finally, one fighter emerged the winner, hitting his opponent hard enough to make their plane fall apart and fall out of the sky. The explosion as it hit the enemy lines was spectacular; perhaps it had landed directly on something important.

“They’re pushing through,” Highlander said grimly. After three hours of brutal fighting, the French were finally starting to gain an advantage, using their tanks ruthlessly. Sir Benjamin wondered coldly who had introduced them to the concept of combining their weapons; simply by keeping infantry near the tanks they had managed to checkmate the bazooka teams. They were taking losses, but not enough to force them to withdraw.

An explosion, not too far away, underscored his words. “What the hell do we do?” Sir Benjamin demanded. “They’ll chase us down if we start to run!”

“We need a rear-guard,” Highlander said. He scowled; I have avoided committing the tanks, but they’re going to be no good in London and...”

“You think we’ll be fighting in *London*?” Sir Benjamin demanded. “Won’t they just surround the city?”

“They’ll have to have some kind of plan to take London,” Highlander snapped. “You’re the commander of the defences and the New Model Army...”

“Most of which is crossing the bloody Atlantic Ocean in a fleet of transports,” Sir Benjamin said. “Sir...”

“I’ve made up my mind,” Highlander said firmly. “You’re needed; the only commanding officer the New Model Army ever has had. I’m...an old warhorse who is no longer needed.”

Sir Benjamin opened his mouth to protest. “Shut up,” Highlander said, before he could speak. “Here are your orders.”

He held Sir Benjamin's eyes, forcing him to back down. "You are to take all, but the 23rd Infantry, the 2nd English Armoured and the 45th Militia," he said. "You are to fall back to London and hold the city as long as you can."

Sir Benjamin shuddered. The French would have learned none of the lessons that had had to be learned by the British and Americans during the War on Terror. Even so, the fighting would be savage...and ruthless. London would be almost certainly destroyed before the *Washington* and its fleet could arrive to save them all.

Assuming it can, of course, he thought bitterly, and shivered.

"It has been an honour to serve with you," Highlander said. His staff, loyal to their commander, had been transmitting his last orders before Sir Benjamin could have said anything. He felt like crying; he was about to do the one thing that British officers hated – running from the battlefield.

"Go," Highlander snapped. "That's a direct order!"

Sir Benjamin held out a hand, which Highlander shook, and turned and ran towards the retreating infantry units. There wouldn't be much time before the French, concentrating on trying to destroy the British army, hammered at Highlander's position...and took it. By that time, the rest of the army had to be well on its way.

The sudden appearance of the armoured counterattack had shocked General Leblanc, who had become convinced – or allowed himself to believe – that there were no British land ironclads about, perhaps none on Britain itself. In the suddenly savage fighting around Maidstone, he lost several of his own land ironclads...and that most precious of items – time.

"My General, the British are making a last stand," his aide said. "We can crush them now."

General Leblanc peered into the distance, just in time to see an anti-tank rocket turn a land ironclad into an inferno, cooking the crew inside, and shuddered. "Have the artillery locked on that position," he snapped, mentally thanking God for some of the new techniques for calculating shelling trajectories. "Kill them all!"

The aide blinked. “But, My General; we have to demand their surrender first. The laws of war...”

“To blazes with the laws of war,” General Leblanc snapped, and hoped that no British man had heard that comment. “Don’t you see? That’s not their army in that position; that’s a rear-guard force! By the time we get past it, they’ll have escaped with the main army, withdrawing it into London!”

He glared at the British position, which suddenly became wrapped in a series of explosions. The gunners had clearly had a light lit under them; they were firing with a rapidity that he’d only seen among the best teams. The entire British position was wreathed in fire...and there was no sign of a surrender. Twice, the infantry and the land ironclads mounted attacks that were repulsed...and finally, the French had to kill every man at his post.

Poor brave stupid bastards, General Leblanc thought, and smiled suddenly. **The road to London lay open ahead of him.**

Chapter Forty-One: The Battle of London

London

United Kingdom, Timeline B

The sounds of distant explosions echoed up the Thames as French ships, mainly battleships and heavy cruisers, attempted to push their way through the heavy defences that had been built to counter a possible raid up the Thames, like one conducted by the Dutch so long ago. After several hours of shelling, the French ships – damaged and battered – withdrew, swearing to return.

Prime Minister Lord Harriman Grey shook his head slowly, reading through the latest reports in the War Room. He was almost alone; the War Cabinet, along with the Royal Family, had been evacuated to Liverpool. That was a carefully concealed secret, along with the damage to the Home Fleet; the damage to public morale if that particular news had gotten out would have been terrifying. The French, having developed more experience in propaganda, had been proclaiming that the combined Royal Navies had been destroyed...and that peace was still possible, if Britain surrendered now.

Grey shook his head again. Even if the entire island fell to the French, something that wasn't that likely with the new defensive lines being constructed, the Royal Navies would regain control of the waters. He just didn't expect to be around to see it.

"Prime Minister?" He looked up to see Air Marshall Bentley. "Prime Minister, I regret to report that several airfields have been overrun."

His flippant words were undermined by the grimness in his tone. "I understand," Grey said. It was a blow; the French were trying to move thousands of aircraft into airfields in Kent, allowing them to challenge the RFC at close range – certainly closer than they'd been when they were flying from France."

"There's also worse news," Air Marshall Bentley said. His tone darkened. "They've landed on the Orkneys; French Marines invaded the islands half an hour ago."

Grey shrugged. "Losing the base would be bad," he said, trying to project confidence. "How bad is it?"

“It’s undecided, as of the last transmission,” Air Marshall Bentley said. He tapped the map of the Orkneys. “The main naval base remains intact and they have covering fire from some of the damaged ships, even though they have used their carriers to attack the few ships that have remained in the port.” He paused. “The Orkneys are several islands, sir, and they have the Royal Marine training site there, so...it won’t be decided in a hurry.”

Grey nodded, wishing that he had time to mourn. He would have plenty of time afterwards, but he suspected that it wasn’t quite the same. “Thank you,” he said. “Send in Cyril, will you?”

Air Marshall Bentley nodded, perhaps understanding the Prime Minister’s concern. He showed no anger at the dismissal, only a quiet nod of respect. He left the room, leaving the Prime Minister alone for a few moments of blessed solitude, and then Commissioner Cyril Mackey entered the room.

“Prime Minister,” he said. The Prime Minister smiled; despite his name Mackey was always the city gent, a tall man wearing a bowler hat and carrying a walking stick. “I have the latest updates, if you would like.”

Grey nodded slowly. Commissioner Cyril Mackey was responsible for coordinating the civilian response to the invasion of the United Kingdom; nine months ago, they’d all thought that it was just an attempt to reassure some of the wavering Members of Parliament. Now, with French troops only miles from London’s outer suburbs and bombs landing hourly, he silently blessed their panic.

“We have kept the rail lines open, despite some heavy French pressure,” Mackey said. Grey nodded; both of the French invasion forces had cut railway lines as a matter of course, along with bombers and some strike teams. “We’re currently moving people out of the city as fast as we can, towards Birmingham and then further north. For the record, all able-bodied men have been conscripted to aid with the defences – and a surprising number of women, led by the suffragettes, have volunteered to help in any way they can be useful.”

Grey’s lip quirked as he thought about what roles the soldiers might have liked to place the women in. He dismissed the thought angrily; there wasn’t time to deal with little problems like that. “Thank you,” he said. “How are the defences?”

“I’m not the officer commanding the defences,” Mackey reminded him. Grey shrugged. “Sir Benjamin pretends high confidence.”

Grey lifted an eyebrow. “Don’t you trust him?” He asked. “It’s a bit late to worry about that now.”

Mackey shrugged. “I don’t know him,” he said. “I would have felt much better if Douglas had survived the last battle.”

Grey winced. He’d known General Sir Douglas Highlander for years. Losing him *hurt*. “I miss him too,” he said. “Now...do you think that we can hold the French off from London?”

Mackey smiled. “Do you want my honest answer?” He asked. “I think that the French will either take the city by direct attack or seek to starve us out. Seeing that they must know as well as we do that the *George Washington* is on its way, they know that they have a time limit to become firmly entrenched here.”

Grey scowled. “I wish you didn’t agree with me,” he said wryly. “Tell me; what is the shape of morale on the streets?”

Mackey shook his head slowly, shaking it from side to side. His hat wobbled on his head as he moved, exposing close-cropped brown hair. “It’s pretty bad, sir,” he said. “A lot of people are listening to the French transmissions, the ones gloating about the Slaughter of Jutland, as they’re calling it. The lack of outright denials...”

“I get the message,” Grey snapped. He’d ordered the BBC to do anything, but lie on the subject. Lying was the one thing that could destroy his career with certainty. He sought a moment of peace. “I thought that listening to the French radio was illegal.”

Mackey snickered. “Prime Minister, with all due respected, there is absolutely no way to prevent people from listening,” he said. “We would have to arrest almost the entire population.”

Grey shook his head. “Very well; forget that,” he snapped. “So, you feel that London cannot be held?”

Mackey met his eyes. “Yes, Prime Minister,” he said. “Sir; you should be in Liverpool, with the rest of the government.”

“No,” Grey said. He sighed once in resignation. “I stand or fall with London.”

Mackey's face altered sharply, becoming an angry scowl. "Sir – Harriman – you are the Prime Minister," he snapped. "You are not a common soldier..."

"But don't you see?" Grey whispered. He waved a hand over at the windows, now boarded up to prevent shell splinters from hurting the occupants of the room. "Out there, there are thousands of common soldiers. The least I can do is share the same risks as them..."

King's Cross Railway Station was a madhouse, with thousands of people waiting to board trains to Birmingham, attempting to escape the two claws of the French pincer. Constable Plod, watching with several dozen other police officers, felt the weight of the service revolver at his belt and wondered what had happened to the police force. Even if they lived through a possible invasion of London, they would never be the same.

"Let me on that train," a woman shouted. She struck out in a blind panic, slamming a heavy bag into an older woman. Constable Plod ran forward before a fight could break out, calling for medics as he did so. The older woman had been hurt, perhaps badly.

"Do not move," he snapped, as he grabbed the aggressor. He wasn't sure if he should feel sorry for her or angry; she was just one of the many women who wanted to get out of the city. The noise of French bombers grew louder as they pounded away at the defence, trying to hit the fortifications that had been built to protect the city.

"Let me go, you utter...prat," the woman screeched at him. Constable Plod almost laughed; from her fine clothes the woman had clearly been raised in an upper-class home, without any of the words that she might have picked up in a lower-class household. "Let me go!"

"You are under arrest," Constable Plod said, just as a series of shattering explosions echoed nearby. The entire station shook; women screamed, children started to panic...and a riot broke out. Even as the policemen ran forward, trying to calm everyone down, the woman kicked Constable Plod in the shins and ran for it.

Should have handcuffed her, he thought, letting her go. Where could she go, after all? The entire crowd was starting to panic, even as fire engines attempted to put

out the new fires that could be seen in the distance. Captain Farthing blew several times on his whistle for silence, and then fired a gunshot into the air.

“Please, do not panic,” he snapped. “Everyone sit down, now, and remain calm.”

His voice worked wonders. The handful of people who disobeyed were arrested quickly and ended up under guard by the policemen. Captain Farthing nodded once, and then waved for his senior constables, including Plod.

“I just got bad news,” he said, and tapped the radio at his belt meaningfully. It was one of the newer inventions; Constable Plod wasn’t quite sure what to make of it. Captain Farthing lowered his voice, leaning towards them. “The French have managed to surround the city,” he said. “There won’t be any more trains out.”

Constable Plod felt his blood run cold. “How will we handle these people?” He asked. “Where can they all go?”

Captain Farthing shook his head slowly. “I don’t know,” he said grimly. “I just don’t know.”

If there was one major difference between this London and his own, that existed in a world that was starting to seem more and more of a dream, it was the fortresses around the outskirts of the city. They reminded him more of Verdun than anything else; a series of fortresses designed to prevent an attack on the city.

“That, and the missing kebab houses, the missing embassies, the missing ethnic minorities,” he muttered to himself. He liked the new London, even though it was both grander and smaller than his own was; it housed an entire global government, but at the same time it only housed Englishmen. The Asian community – the Indians and Pakistanis of his home timeline – hardly existed here, mainly people who catered to specialist tastes.

“Sir?” General Machete asked. The British general, who’d adopted the name after losing a bet, had resented being placed under a ‘jumped-up colonel,’ resented it enough to be angry at Sir Benjamin, knighthood or no. “What are those?”

Sir Benjamin shook his head. “London through the looking glass,” he said. “It hardly matters; what matters is holding the city. What’s the latest?”

Machete scowled at him. A little informality always seemed to get on his nerves. “The French have almost completely surrounded the city,” he said. “If they plan to starve us out, they have succeeded.”

Sir Benjamin didn’t bother to reply. Fighting in the open, as Machete has urged, would have merely led to the defeat of the British Army in short order. With the new tanks and troops being raised in the north, victory could still be won even without the New Model Army...assuming that they had the time to build their forces. That meant holding London.

He scowled. By contrast, the French *had* to take London quickly, before they could move on to the other cities. If they were in a strong position on the mainland, then even a defeat to the *George Washington* might not prove fatal. If they were engaged in a siege...then they would not be in a strong position – QED.

“They will attempt to hold us here and head north,” Machete said, when Sir Benjamin didn’t reply. “That’s what I’d do.”

That’s what I would do too, if it was just them and I, Sir Benjamin thought. God knew that whoever was commanding the French forces was certainly more competent than anyone France had developed in his original timeline since Petain. The problem was that the French were operating to a time limit...and when that ran out...

“Sir, I’m sure that...” Machete began. A hail of shellfire interrupted him; both men dived for the ground and fell down the stairs to the bunker. “Report,” Machete bellowed, picking himself up with dispatch. The ground began to shake violently as burst after burst of shellfire impacted on the ground, sending dust drifting down to the ground.

“Sir, we’re under attack,” a dispatcher said. “The French are advancing along three separate axis.”

Sir Benjamin stepped forward, wishing for the reconnaissance capabilities of his own world. Blocks of wood on a map didn’t seem to cut it, somehow. “Have the reinforcements prepared,” he ordered. If the French did manage to break through, the breach would have to be sealed as soon as possible. “Keep me updated as soon as you hear anything new.”

Captain Foch kept his head low as he ran forward, leading the rest of his platoon forward towards the British fort. The British had built several layers of defences around their capital, enough defences to give even the Emperor's Own pause. Explosions and more explosions shook the ground, triggering mines ahead of him. He threw himself to the ground; when he looked up he saw the shape of the first British fort ahead of him.

"If we could take that, we would be heroes," he muttered to his sergeant. The British had been careful, with heavy sticks and sharp objects on the roof – for a reason that Foch didn't understand – but a shell had struck the fort hard enough to expose a corridor. There was a network of trenches around the fort, but hardly enough to hold them back.

"We need an ironclad," the sergeant muttered back, as a hail of machine gun bullets rang over their heads. The British didn't seem to have seen them, aiming at a French platoon that had unwisely stood up too soon. They were wiped out before they knew what had hit them.

"We only need stealth," Foch snapped, examining the situation. Cowering as low as they were, it was unlikely that the British had seen them. Carefully, he pulled a grenade from his belt and lobbed it as hard as he could, tossing it towards the British trench.

"Come on," he snapped, and moved as fast as he ever had in his life. The handful of British soldiers outside the fort were stunned or dead; the French killed the survivors quickly. The walls of the fort stood in front of them...with a caved-in section where a shell had landed. "Into the breach."

Inside, the fortress was damp and cold. The French platoon moved carefully deeper and deeper within the fortress, trying to stay out of sight. It didn't work; a British guard challenged them as they reached a large door.

"The red eagle is sitting on the black flower pot," he snapped. Foch realised that it was one half of a pass code – and he didn't know the other half. He lifted his weapon and opened fire, raking the corridors with gunfire. He tried to open the door and failed; whatever it was made of was too tough for them to break open.

"We have to move," his sergeant snapped. It was too late; a British patrol had come around the corner at a run, weapons already raised. Two minutes later, the entire French platoon had been wiped out.

London was burning.

General Leblanc could see the battle from his position, but he also knew one thing that he hadn't shared with anyone, not yet. The battle was going to be lost. He had hoped that the ironclads would have made a difference, but in close-quarters they were almost useless. After losing ten of them to antitank rockets, he'd ordered them to be pulled back and concentrated on the shellfire, but that...just wasn't enough to force the British to surrender.

"My General, we have taken the third fort," his aide proclaimed, with all the eagerness of a man who has won an auction – with no knowledge or heeding of the cost. "Surely we will now defeat them."

"We won't defeat them, you young fool," General Leblanc snarled. "Can't you see; we haven't broken through, we've just...widened the battle zone for us and..."

A British shell landed far too close to them, impacting on a number of French army lorries and commandeered British vehicles. The chain explosion destroyed them and deafened General Leblanc, who was reduced to poking at his ear until it agreed to hear again.

"My General, we are pressing them hard," the aide protested.

"Do they not teach you manners at officer training?" General Leblanc snapped. "We have lost; if we still manage to take the city, we'll take a city in ruins and break the back of the army doing it."

He ignored the aide's protests. What he was about to do would earn him the enmity of the Crown Prince – and probably *Contre-Admiral* François Videzun as well. "Contact the commanders of the different thrusts," he ordered. "Order them to fall back to defensible positions."

The aide cowered in front of him. "Yes, My General," he said. "It will be done."

General Leblanc ignored his simpering and stared down at the map of England. It was bigger than it had seemed before, he understood, and everything depended on the ability of the navy to hold back the Royal North American Navy from saving Britain's behind. If the American forces managed to punch through...then his

force was doomed to a long and bloody land battle...without any certainty of victory.

The firing slacked off slightly as he issued further orders, ordering the men to stop bombarding the city and the defences. The French troops fell back in good order, leaving a burning city behind them. The British, perhaps battered just as badly, didn't attempt to chase the French, settling for only a few local counterattacks.

Bastards, General Leblanc thought. *What the hell am I going to tell the **Crown Prince**?*

Chapter Forty-Two: Thrust and Parry

Bourbon Palace

Paris, France (TimeLine B)

The Crown Prince, *Contre-Admiral* François Videzun was amused to discover, had wasted no time converting the Throne room into *his* throne room. His father's artworks, pictures that had been painted in styles that would not have been out of place in Napoleon's France, had been replaced by paintings that were almost pornographic. The Crown Prince's service, mainly consisting of French Maids – a thought that made Videzun smile – had been moved into the main rooms, where they were working on serving him.

“The attack has been a part-success?” The Crown Prince asked. They stood alone in the throne room; the Crown Prince had dismissed everyone else. His tone was surprisingly mild; revealing newer and deeper aspects to his personality than Videzun had even suspected.

“Yes, Your Highness,” Videzun said. He considered the situation at length. “We have managed to establish two firm regions of control on the British mainland, but we cannot take London, not now.”

“My forces cannot take London?” The Crown Prince asked. “The city has never been under siege for centuries. They're not ready for a war at their city walls.”

Videzun shrugged. He'd been surprised himself; Britain had never been invaded in his timeline or the new one. He'd been curious enough to realise what was different; for nearly two hundred years the British had been far too close to a united Europe to feel safe, even with the Channel in the way.

“If we attempt to take the city now, we will bleed out the army for nothing,” Videzun said, and hoped that the Crown Prince would listen. “Their defences may not be as capable as anything we would build” – at least he hoped that that was true – “but they will be capable of bleeding us until we had lost most of the army. It's happened in my reality.”

He paused to check the Crown Prince's reactions. “In fact, we have to await the *George Washington*,” he said. “The Americans are on their way. If we can defeat them, then we have won. If not, then we can cut our losses and defend what part

of Britain we hold.” He tapped the map. “If we just seal off London, we can envelop most of their cities and cropland, limiting their food supplies.”

He sensed more than felt the Crown Prince’s amusement. Prime Minister Vincent Pelletier had been shocked at the suggestion, of course; Sherman’s march to the sea had never happened in this timeline, never introduced everyone to the concept of total war. The Emperor had been reluctant to use any such methods; his son would be far less reluctant.

“Excellent concept,” the Crown Prince said. “A shame about losing that regiment of the Irish Bastards; they would be perfect for the mission.”

“There is already rebellion simmering in Ireland,” Videzun reminded him. “Perhaps, we will be able to send them some assistance.”

“Perhaps,” the Crown Prince said. He sat straighter; Videzun realised suddenly that he looked less...fat than he had been before. “How do you plan to deal with the *George Washington* and the Americans?”

Videzun frowned. He didn’t want to discuss the plan; it would only upset people. “The carrier is far more powerful than ours,” he said. He’d actually put some thought into trying to steal the Russian submarine *Putin*, finally identified by the French Secret Service, but upon learning that it had literally been grounded he’d realised that it was impossible. “A direct clash would mean that my ship would be sunk rapidly.”

He scowled again; the *George Washington* had to be handled carefully, just to ensure that it was quickly sunk. “We might be able to overwhelm it by weight of numbers, but that will be chancy, particularly with the British carriers nearby as well. I have given orders for submarines to attempt to intercept the fleet, but I don’t think that they will have any major success.”

The Crown Prince quirked an eyebrow. “And why have you sent them?” He enquired. “If they will be sunk...”

“They might get lucky,” Videzun said, and smiled. “You never know. However, we will have to attack the fleet as it approaches Britain, before it can launch against our fleet.”

“Your Hellfire missiles,” the Crown Prince said.

“Hellebores,” Videzun corrected absently. It was a natural mistake, he supposed. “The problem is that we have only twenty left...but if we use them properly we can use them to destroy the *George Washington*.” He scowled; the nuclear program had given them no results in a useable timeframe, although he wasn’t really surprised. A single nuclear-tipped missile would have really ruined the *Washington*’s day. “Still, one of those warheads was built to handle a ship with more armour, so using them...”

“On the other hand, the *George Washington* carries missiles of its own,” Videzun said, and scowled. *They’d* used creative accounting to hide the Hellebore missiles; might the Americans have done the same? “It can sink the *Charles de Gaulle* and it can sink our seven carriers. At worst, we have to aim for mutual destruction of both carrier forces, which gives us a superiority in surface ships.”

He’d wondered if the Crown Prince would blanch at the possible death toll. The Crown Prince didn’t move at all. “You are talking about risking the *Charles de Gaulle*,” he said finally. “That ship is...important.”

“Not as important as taking out the *Washington*,” Videzun said. “A trade-off leaves us with an advantage.”

He smiled. He hadn’t shared *that* with Captain Jean-Pierre Mauroy. It would have only upset him.

“I do trust that you are right,” the Crown Prince said finally. “And the reinforcements for the troops in England?”

“Is proceeding as fast as we can,” Videzun assured him. “General Papule is reinforcing the two fronts as fast as possible and we’ll be digging in all the time. Even if they take back control of the Channel, they’ll have to force us out...and that will take them time – time which will devastate Britain.”

The Crown Prince nodded slowly. “Will you be taking command of the battle against the *George Washington*?” He asked. “You do not appear sure?”

Videzun ignored the questioning tone. The battle didn’t have a hope without him in command. “Yes, Your Highness,” he said. “I will be in command.”

“Very good,” the Crown prince said. “Now, send in my Consort and depart.”

Videzun bowed and left, smiling to himself. How lucky it had been to have the

Crown Prince heavily attracted to one of his people. It had been more than he'd dared hope for.

Prime Minister Vincent Pelletier sat next to the bed and watched his Emperor as he slept. The Emperor's chest rose and fell, but there was no other sign of life and his breath sometimes became gasping, struggling for air. When that happened, the nurses from the *Charles de Gaulle* had shoved him aside to work desperately on the Emperor, trying to keep him alive for a few more hours, a few more days, a few more weeks...long enough for him to come back and end the madness of the war.

Pelletier still had access to the reports; the army generals knew better than to keep them from him. The Emperor was still the Emperor – only he could sack the Prime Minister. Pelletier's job wasn't to be Mr Popular; it was to serve the Emperor and through him the Empire. In order to do that, he needed total access to all of the information. It didn't look good, even though they tried to make it sound good; until the *George Washington* was wrecked it would not be decided. If Operation Sealion somehow failed, then...

If Operation Sealion failed, then a large part of the French army, including many of the reequipped units, would be trapped in Britain, unable to retreat. Even if the British were merciful, which they would have little reason to be, they had no obligation to return them to France...and the Russians were lurking on the border. So far, they'd been quiet – and there had been no signs of the wonder land ironclads that had broken what had been intended to be a decisive battle – but Pelletier knew that that could change at any moment. The Russian Tsar was far from sane, and he would want to snatch land while the French were busy elsewhere.

It didn't work, Pelletier thought, and scowled. The slaughter on the New Spain front, the...stalemate in the east, the failure to take London – all of it meant that the attempt to use the new weapons and the new way of warfare had failed, almost completely. They'd stopped the British in New Spain – the Caribbean had been the only major loss – and the British had kept them out of London. Pelletier hoped that the Crown Prince wouldn't order a futile attack – or that General Leblanc would have the courage to ignore such an order if it came – because if that attack happened, thousands of Frenchmen would die for nothing.

“And because we’ve stopped them and they’ve stopped us, the stalemate is back,” Pelletier muttered to himself, feeling the weight of his position pressing down on him. He looked down at the Emperor, wondering if his muttering would have awoken him, but he didn’t stir. Pelletier sighed; it was too much for him. How could anyone bear to live in a world where wars like this were a fact of life?

We have to have peace, he thought, and tried to compose the arguments that would have convinced the Crown Prince. He found none; the young man, like all young men who had never known the horrors of war, wanted glory – and he didn’t care who had to suffer and die in order to achieve it. He had seemed such a nice child when he was young, and then he’d grown into a stupid and lecherous man and then it had been revealed to have been a mask...

He hid his light under a façade of uselessness for twenty years, he thought, and shuddered. The Crown Prince was different; he was showing all of his father’s intelligence and none of his compassion, none of the hard-won experience of how the world works and...

“Is His Majesty feeling better?” A female voice asked. Pelletier turned slightly to see Princess Jasmine, smiling nervously at him. She shouldn’t be anywhere near the medical room, it was guarded by the Emperor’s Own, and...he found it hard to care. A ten-year-old girl could hardly be an assassin, could she?

“He’s still asleep,” Pelletier said grimly. He noticed that she was carrying flowers in one hand; they contrasted oddly with her purple dress. “How did you get in here?”

“Oh, the guard said I could go in,” Jasmine said. Her voice was serious; Pelletier realised that she was growing up, or trying to act the part. He remembered the young girl who’d climbed around the palace and felt like crying. “Will he be alright?”

“His Majesty will be fine,” Pelletier said. “I’m sure of it...”

“I meant my...husband,” Jasmine said. Pelletier looked sharply at her; her voice had broken on the last word. He shook his head in sympathy; the demands of state had robbed her of her childhood, of the pleasure of being an unmarried Lady of the Court and they’d done it in such a way that she was denied the pleasures of being married.

Bastards, he thought coldly. She was acting the role of a wife; she didn’t

understand that it was for real. “He should be fine,” Pelletier said, with more harshness than he had intended. “He’s in the palace, at the centre of our defences.”

“The maids say that they hear noises from His Highness’s room,” Jasmine said. “The sounds of a person crying, a woman crying.”

Pelletier made a mental note to discipline the maids...and then his mind caught up with him. “A woman crying?” He asked. “Who?”

“I don’t know,” Jasmine said. “They’ve been saying that he hurts her.”

Pelletier felt a lump of cold ice congeal around his heart. “He hurts whom?” He asked. “Your husband?”

Jasmine leaned forward; Pelletier reached out and gave her a hug. She clung to him gratefully as she cried. “They say he hurts people,” she said. “He’ll hurt my husband.”

Pelletier looked down at the sleeping Emperor. There were no procedures for disposing of an Emperor, even though noblemen could be impeached; the Emperors had made certain of that over the years. If the Crown Prince had become sadistic and cruel...who was there to stop him?

“What are you two doing there?” An imperious voice demanded. “Prime Minister Pelletier; you should not be there with a child.”

“I’m a wife,” Jasmine protested. Her dark face gleamed with tears. “I’m a married woman.”

Doctor Mimi Rouge didn’t bother to comment. Pelletier didn’t move, even slightly; he’d realised that a lot of people from Timeline A either thought that Videzun’s marriage was a joke, or something awful. There had even been a major fight over it, between some members of the ship’s crew. He smiled for a bitter second; more and more of the *Charles de Gaulle*’s crew were finding a new home in Toulon. They seemed to enjoy the French-ness of the town, something that puzzled him. Wasn’t Toulon French in their timeline?

“You may be married, but you’re not married to him,” Mimi said. Pelletier said nothing, even when Jasmine looked at him pleadingly. “Out.”

“One moment,” Pelletier said. “Doctor; we need him awake.”

Something flickered in Mimi’s eyes. “Prime Minister, trying to force someone awake is very dangerous to him or her,” she said. “If I try to awaken the Emperor, it could kill him, or risk serious brain damage, or any number of serious problems.”

“You may not have a choice,” Pelletier said. “Doctor...have you been asked to examine any woman recently.”

Her face flickered again. It hardened into an impenetrable mask. “Prime Minister, I do not disclose confidential details of anyone who comes to see me,” she said. “In this post, there are several women who come to see me and several different kinds of man, most of them who only want me to put some extra lead in their pencil.”

Pelletier smiled; Jasmine looked bemused. “There may be someone being hurt,” Pelletier said. “If that happens, would you mind telling the person that they can come to talk to me about it?”

Mimi nodded slowly. “I’ll do what I can,” she said. Pelletier was certain that she knew more than she was telling him. “Until then, out.”

Pelletier took one last look at the Emperor, bowed once to him, and then left the room. Jasmine curtsied, a child’s attempt to perform an adult curtsy, and followed him. “Come with me,” Pelletier said, and led her into a small sitting room. The irony was almost killing him; he wanted to giggle.

“Answer me a question,” he said. She looked up at him expectantly, her dark eyes shadowed with concern. “What’s married life like?”

Jasmine looked oddly disappointed. “It’s the same as it was,” she said. “I sleep in a different bed – I thought that husband and wife slept together.”

Pelletier shook his head slowly, fighting the temptation to laugh. “Not until you’re older,” he said. “Seriously – *don’t* even think about it.”

Jasmine smiled, curtsied, and left him alone in the room. Pelletier smiled ruefully, and then felt grim again. Whatever was happening, it was connected with Videzun. In the end, everything came back to him, these days. A thought struck him and he shuddered; had Videzun somehow poisoned the Emperor?

I wonder if he got more than he bargained for with the Crown Prince, he thought, and started to think as hard as he ever had. Something had to be done, and quickly...but what?

French Intelligence Agents, particularly the female ones, were trained in seduction techniques. A man would brag to a lover in ways he wouldn't under truth drug – and would have absolutely no recollection of it the following morning. Jacqueline Petal, who had always suspected that it was an excuse for the instructors to have it off with the students, had scored top marks. None of it had prepared her for the Crown Prince.

She stared at herself in the mirror, examining her left breast. It was a nice breast – countless lovers had told her that – and she loved it, but now there were marks all over it. It wasn't that the Crown Prince was into sadistic sexual play, in the form of a game, like Bondage; it was that he was sadistic.

She choked back a sob. He'd hurt her, hurt her enough to nearly make her cry, and she knew that he didn't even have it in him to feel contempt or sadism. He was a child innocently pulling the wings off flies; intrigued by his own cruelty...but with no intention of stopping.

"The people with the high intelligence are the worst," she recited, from memory. She'd thought that he was stupid, that his attempt to grope her had been from lust rather than from any other motive, but she'd been wrong. Her hand passed across her back; the signs of what he called lovemaking were still there, just hidden during the day under her uniform.

She slowly washed herself as best as she could, gasping in pain when the water hit a sensitive spot. She'd had bad lovers before, even an elderly atomic professor who'd been into bondage, but he'd been kind, if impotent. The Crown Prince...

"I can't take this anymore," she muttered to herself, cursing her decision to sail on the *Charles de Gaulle*. Even a *Jihadi* rape squadron, a group that had the sole intent to humiliate and demean western woman, even they *hated*! The Crown Prince...

"Come back in here," his voice shouted. Jacqueline flinched, trying to contain the shuddering in her body, and tottered to the door. She wrapped a towel around herself, but she knew that he would tear it off...if he felt like another round. He

did.

Chapter Forty-Three: Clash of the Giants

Atlantic Ocean

100km west of Britain, TimeLine B

Once, when he was a mere Captain, Admiral Jackson had taken part in a war game, when the massed might of the United States faced an unnamed Third World country. It had been a complete disaster...for the United States. The unnamed enemy, popularly supposed to be Iraq, had used special unorthodox tactics to hammer the American fleet so badly that it had been forced to withdraw.

Jackson smiled grimly. The overseers had promptly declared the victory illegal and stricken it from the record. It had been sheer luck – and Saddam’s refusal to set anyone competent over his defence forces – that the United States hadn’t faced a genuinely smart and competent enemy in the years of the Terror War. Jackson knew that some senior officers within the United States Navy had been worried about facing an equal opponent in combat – before the UFOs swept them into Timeline B.

He looked up at the display. Normally, the Combat Information Centre would be glittering with information from satellites, recon aircraft, intelligence sources and the other ships in the task force. At the moment, his reach was about two hundred miles from the ship; there were no satellites here and he was unwilling to risk sending any of his remaining aircraft too far from his ship. The aircraft from the Royal North American Navy carriers were more expendable, but he had no illusions about their ability to escape the aircraft from the *Charles de Gaulle*.

“What are you thinking, you bastard?” He asked, thinking of the French admiral. He had already proved himself to be brave, cunning and determined; qualities that Jackson would have admired more if they weren’t being used against him. The guts it must have taken to have planned and executed the Hellebore strike, the willingness to risk the attack on Britain itself...all of them had been masterstrokes in their way.

“Admiral?” Captain Sonja Robertson asked. The Commander of the Air Group had been planning for strikes against the *Charles de Gaulle*, when it was finally located. Jackson and Commander Thomas Henderson, Weapons Officer, had spent hours trying to work out how many Hellebores might be left, before giving up. At worst, they’d concluded, the French would have fifty left, all of which

would be aimed at the *Washington*.

“It’s bloody Midway again,” Jackson said, as the display flickered slightly. An uncharacteristic contact was reclassified as a flock of seabirds, flying from some tiny uncharted island somewhere in the distance. *Rockall, perhaps?* Jackson thought.

“They could be anywhere,” Sonja agreed. “They might know where we are...”

“I know,” Jackson said. He’d evolved two plans; if they found the French first, the *Washington*’s strike aircraft would go into action, knocking out the *Charles de Gaulle* before it could launch a counter-strike. Then the other French carriers could be sunk at long distance...and then the French ships could surrender or die, for all he cared.

On the other hand, if the *Charles de Gaulle* caught a sniff of them first, they would launch a strike of their own against the *Washington*. In that case, the strike would consist of missiles from their Dassault Rafale aircraft, all of which would be aimed at the *Washington*. If that happened, then the point defence system would have to work...or the *Washington* would be destroyed.

In which case, the water gets contaminated for years, according to the eco-freaks, Jackson thought grimly, and resumed staring at the map. It wouldn’t be long before they passed close to Britain, and then they would be able to support the British forces and land the New Model Army. He had no doubt that the French were waiting somewhere, perhaps just below the horizon, and preparing to strike a deadly blow.

“Submarine contact,” Commander Patrick O’Reilly said calmly. His voice echoed through the intercom, warning them about a low-powered u-boat-like submarine. Jackson tapped the screen, flicking to the external monitors, just in time to see a distant burst of water break the surface, marking the submarine’s death at the hands of an ASW helicopter.

“Did it get a signal off?” He asked quickly. “Any sign of one?”

There was a slight pause. “No, sir,” Lieutenant Edward Doyle said finally. The communications officer had found love in the form of a woman back in Springfield; he might not move to Cuba along with most of the crew. There had been a long and violent argument about that, below decks. “There was no signal. I must remind you, however...”

“I understand,” Jackson said. There was no hope of setting up even a jury-rigged laser-link between the ships, and that was impossible for the aircraft anyway. The small fleet would be radiating radio signals like no one’s business, attracting attention from both the French and the Russians. The signals were low-powered, of course, but if the French had a passive sensor suite too close to the fleet...

He smiled suddenly, at ease with his decision. Hellebore missiles were BDMs; Big Dumb Missiles. They carried massive warheads and small computers; they were literally too stupid to be distracted from their role. They had been designed to counter American ECM developments; brute force to counter finesse.

He paused suddenly, thinking a nasty thought. *Did someone whisper in their ears that they might be needed here?*

He shook his head. It didn’t matter; Hellebore missiles were *stupid*; they had one vast disadvantage...and he intended to take advantage of it. When the French launched their remaining missiles, he had a plan for handling it...

The massive cluster of signals that made up the *George Washington* battle group could be seen at very long distance. In contrast to the *Washington*, Captain Jean-Pierre Mauroy had taken one simple precaution; turning all radiation emitters, such as radio, off for good. If the fleet ran silent, they should be able to get within hitting range before the Americans caught onto their presence.

“That’s them,” Commander Hachay, the radar operator, said with certainty. “There’s nothing that packs such a powerful sensor suite on this world, apart from us.”

Mauroy stared at the screen for a long moment. Every instinct he had was telling him to run; the *Charles de Gaulle* wasn’t designed for a combat with a ship like the *Washington*. There was no choice, of course, but it would be...tricky to get it right – and extremely dangerous if they got it wrong. If the plan failed, the American aircraft would be all over the *Charles de Gaulle*...and the thirty aircraft left on the ship would be unable to stop them from ripping his ship apart.

We shouldn’t have left those aircraft on Britain, he thought, even though he understood the reasoning. *Contre-Admiral* François Videzun had explained it all at great length; the *Washington* could be defeated...but only if everyone played their parts just right.

“Pull us back,” he commanded, knowing that the *Washington* would be unable to see them. “Now...send the signal.” He paused for a long moment. This was it; they were committed. “Launch flight one.”

The seven French carriers had been largely configured to launch attack aircraft, carrying torpedoes and bombs for the enemy carriers. Superdreadnaughts, they knew, could be left alone until later – carriers ruled the seas now. As Captain Cauthery led his flight off the flight deck of the *Emperor Louis XV*, he shuddered; he’d seen the aircraft from the *Charles de Gaulle* and suspected that the United States – whatever that was – aircraft would be just as good.

He smiled as he saw a flash of light glinting from an aircraft hanging below. The *Charles de Gaulle* might not be nearby, but it had sent some of its aircraft to escort them. With those wonderful aircraft on their side, how could they fail?

He checked his compass carefully, knowing that a single mistake could result in them getting very lost indeed, and watched as the fleet of aircraft skimmed over the waves. How long, he wondered, would it be until they finally met the British fleet – and completed the task of destroying it?

The alarms rang, warning everyone on board that an enemy strike had been detected. Pilots ran to their aircraft; the ready flight was already being launched, along with the tanker that had been on stand-by. Admiral Jackson watched as the tanker climbed to its ceiling height, escorted by four F-18s, and then returned his attention to his board.

“We have at least four hundred aircraft, types comparable to Zero-design, heading our way,” Commander Patrick O’Reilly said grimly. “They’ll be on us in twenty minutes.”

Jackson nodded, even as Admiral Anderson’s aircraft carriers began launching their aircraft. With four hundred aircraft inbound, perhaps more, they would be needed – and if *Contre-Admiral* François Videzun had designated the French fighters as cannon fodder, they would be needed to save on the advanced weapons. A plane could refuel in mid-air; Jackson had yet to hear of a way for them to reload.

“Vector Commander Harpoon’s first strike along their line of flight,” he ordered. The Little Air Boss, Commander Simon Washington, nodded. His name was the source of much ribbing below decks, but there was no questioning his competence. “If the *Charles de Gaulle* is there, it’s the prime target. If not, then they’re to take out their carriers.”

“Yes, sir,” Commander Simon Washington said, and headed over to his console to issue the orders. Jackson returned to staring at the display, wondering exactly what was going on. Sending the propeller-aircraft in first made sense, he supposed, but why not combine the strikes?

“Order the AWACS to climb higher,” he said. They’d been surprised once before by the enemy bolting a modern missile onto one of their aircraft. “In fact, order it to do a detailed search of the region and...”

“Here they come,” Captain Morrigan said. His voice was calm and composed. “All decks, brace for impact. Close-in defence weapons, free. Weapons hot; I repeat, weapons hot.”

Admiral Anderson knew that the battle has already passed beyond his ability to control it. He'd heard how the *George Washington*, with a proper task force, could control a battle and every last detail, but he knew that the *Amherst* was not up to that task. He watched grimly as the French aircraft swept in...and his own aircraft moved in to counter them.

“Pom-poms are firing,” Captain George Caesar reported. Anderson said nothing; this was Caesar’s ship, not his. The *Amherst* rocked as its anti-aircraft weapons fired; any hits they scored would be though luck, not through technology. Some people were talking about linking the guns into radar, but he couldn’t see that happening for a while.

“Something’s wrong,” he said, as a thunderous explosion blew the destroyer *Hyacinth* out of the water. He couldn’t see what had happened; the explosion had been big enough to utterly shatter the destroyer. A French aircraft swooped down towards the *Amherst*, but launched no torpedoes; the targets were clearly the carriers. A missile from the *Washington* killed it before it could launch any weapons.

Anderson shuddered. There was something so...indecent about such killing. A

shattering series of explosions marked the death of one of his carriers, but he couldn't see which one it was, hidden through all the dust and smoke of the battle. Later, he would know and he would mourn, but until then...

"The *Lord Kenneth* has been sunk," the fleet control operator reported. "The enemy are concentrating on the *Washington*."

"Bastards," Caesar commented. "Sir, if we send our aircraft to cover the *Washington*..."

"It'll limit our own defences," Anderson agreed. There was no question, though; there was only one possible answer. "Send all of the aircraft, cover the *Washington* as best as you can."

Lieutenant Franklin Kratman held his F-18 high above the fray, watching for threats to the *Washington* itself. When he saw one, he swooped down into the fray, firing madly with his cannon and weaving from side to side. The French torpedo-bomber, already preparing an attack run, never saw what had hit it as the F-18 blew the plane apart. Kratman swept out through a cloud of French aircraft, relying on the effects of his passage to destroy them. The shockwave shattered the aircraft, even as some of them dared to fire back at him.

"Kratman, get out of there," his commander snapped. "Handle..."

He was cut off by the *deedle-deedle-deedle* of the threat receiver. Kratman acted on instinct, swinging the plane around into evasive action, just in time to dodge a missile from a Rafale. The French aircraft didn't seem too bothered; it followed Kratman, firing at him every time the pilot saw a clear shot.

"Fuck off," Kratman snapped, sending his aircraft through a series of tight turns. The Rafale was just as manoeuvrable as the F-18 and followed him through the motions, firing at him. "Thousands of incompetents in the French Navy and I get the one fucking guy who deserved the medals they planted on him."

"Heads-up," one of his fellows said. "Ah reckon this guy deserves a missile."

"I'm not fucking arguing," Kratman snapped. "Kill him or get out of the fucking way."

“Firing,” the pilot said. Ten seconds later, the Rafale had been struck by a missile and destroyed. The two pilots flew together in a moment of peace and quiet.

“Good shot,” Kratman said, not without jealousy. How many pilots had a chance to take a shot at a Rafale? “I suppose we’d better get back to the party.”

“Ah reckon that they can make do without us,” his fellow said. “Ah think that we should take a gander at the other French jets.”

“The Rafales have been splashed,” Captain Jason Groom reported. “That’s the end of the French jets.”

“No, it’s not,” Jackson said. He had an uneasy feeling in his chest. Something was really wrong. “Where’s the *Charles de Gaulle*?”

Captain Morrigan spoke grimly. “The Vikings are nearly at the French battle group now,” he said. “They might be about to destroy it.”

Jackson shook his head. “Have the other strike groups prepared,” he said. “The *Charles de Gaulle* must be out there somewhere.”

The S-3A Viking had been planned to be scrapped – or sold to other navies – by the end of 2009. The war situation had merited keeping a few, including the flight commanded by Commander Harpoon. It was not the most prestigious of aircraft, but Harpoon – who allowed only one joke at the expense of his name – loved his flight. Eleven Vikings, armed with anti-ship missiles, and seventeen F-18s escorting them.

“What a wonderful day it is for flying,” he commented, as he digested the information from the AWACS. He wished that they had a proper drone, but there were only a handful of them available and his mission wasn’t as important to some people as *he* thought it was. “Look...I see some ships.”

The pilot chuckled. “Commander, I think they’re big ships,” he said, affecting a little-boy voice. “I do believe that they’ve seen us.”

“Escorts, have fun,” Harpoon said. The F-18s could clear the skies of the enemy

fighters, all propeller-driven, before the Vikings could start their mission. He didn't think that the fighters could have stopped them unloading their Harpoon missiles onto their carriers, but it was well to be certain. "Eye-sky, can you locate primary target?"

"That's a big negative," the AWACS said. The operator's tone was grim; if the primary target was missing, then it would have to be found...and it could be anywhere. "Only French carriers and their escorts."

"Understood," harpoon said. He tapped orders into his computer, designating targets. "All aircraft; launch AGM-84 Harpoon; one apiece."

The aircraft shuddered as it launched the missile. There was no need to engage from such close range; the French had nothing that could have stopped the missiles, but the Admiral had wanted to try to keep the French in the dark about the true extent of the AGM-84 Harpoon's capabilities. Personally, Harpoon thought that that was a waste of time, but it didn't pay to question an admiral's orders.

"Impact in twenty seconds," his pilot said, as the swarm of missiles lanced towards the enemy carriers. The French clearly had some idea of what was coming, moving their carriers as fast as they could – futile, since the missiles could move to pursue them. The explosions tore through seven carriers...and missiles struck three superdreadnaughts.

"I confirm direct hits," the AWACS said. "Be warned; two enemy superdreadnaughts appear to have survived the experience."

Harpoon cursed. Firing on the French superdreadnaughts had been a gamble, but who could really grasp how limited their weapons were against such armour? The French had Hellebore missiles...the Americans...did not.

"I think that you killed the command crew, though," the AWACS continued, after a long moment. "The ships are moving randomly in the water and there's still some burning on one."

"Humm," Harpoon said. "Orders?"

"You're to refuel," the AWACS said. "And then...stand by."

“The *Charles de Gaulle* wasn’t there,” Morrigan said grimly. Jackson, who’d been watching on the main screens, nodded. “Sir – Admiral – if we can’t find her...”

“Then all of this has been for nothing,” Jackson snapped, as the *Washington* shuddered. A French plane had crashed on the side of the ship; not hard enough to cause serious damage, but enough to worry him. It wasn’t as if there was a dry-dock that could take her in this world. The remaining French planes kept fighting, either unaware that their carriers had been sunk – or determined to take the Americans down with them.

He thought rapidly. If he could be certain that the *Charles de Gaulle* was out of the game, he could order the close-in weapons and the F-18s to engage. The fight could be ended quickly – but at the cost of burning through their weapons. As he couldn’t be certain...

“Admiral,” Commander Patrick O’Reilly said. “I really think you should see this.”

Jackson swung around to the main display. He’d ordered an AWACS – an E2 Hawkeye – to go looking for the *Charles de Gaulle*. It had found something, and...

There was only one thing to say. “Shit,” he breathed.

Chapter Forty-Four: The Empire Strikes Back

Atlantic Ocean

100km west of Britain, TimeLine B

Contre-Admiral François Videzun's plan had been simple; the essence of a good plan. The Hellebore missiles didn't have a long enough range to launch them from the French fleet, and at the same time they had to have their rudimentary computers constantly updated with the location of their main target. If the remaining fighters, carrying the Hellebores, were slipped in while the main battle was raging, they would have the best chance of actually hitting the *George Washington*.

"Admiral, we have incoming," Commander Thomas Henderson snapped. "Incoming Dassault Rafales, launching missiles now." There was a brief pause. "They're Hellebores!"

Jackson grasped the side of his chair and cursed. He heard Morrigan barking out orders, retargeting all of the *Washington's* defences, and he'd never felt so helpless in his life. If a single Hellebore could take out a battleship, then the *Washington* would be wrecked by one, if not sunk outright.

"Order the launch of every aircraft," he ordered, forgetting himself. Every aircraft had already been launched. "No, countermand that; order every aircraft to take down those missiles!"

"Yes, sir," Captain Sonja Robertson said. "Orders sent!"

Jackson thought as fast as he could. He dismissed the Rafales as a threat – unless they launched suicide attacks they had to be almost unarmed now – but the missiles were the real threat. Eighteen Hellebores, closing in on the *Washington*. They were ignoring the other ships; the *Washington* was their only target.

Heads they win, tails I lose, Jackson thought, as missiles launched rapidly from the *Washington's* close-in defence launchers. If the missiles weren't aimed exactly right, they would miss their targets – he could only hope that they would have time to fire a second round of missiles.

"F-18s launching missiles now," Sonja said. Her voice was tense; the jet fighters

had only one shot at hitting the missiles. “One impact...two impacts...”

“Sixteen to go,” Jackson muttered. Time was slowing, almost standing still. “When are the missiles popping up?”

“They’re not,” the radar operator said. His voice rose. “Sir, the *Havelock*!”

Jackson swung around to the display. The battlecruiser *Havelock* was moving slowly, far too slowly, right into the path of a missile. Before anyone could do anything, the Hellebore struck the *Havelock* and destroyed it utterly. Two more missiles fell to fighter-launched missiles, then another...

Thirteen to go, Jackson thought numbly. He scowled; the French had pulled one very nasty trick off, with missiles that were too dumb to be fooled by ECM. “Activate the Daemon’s Protocols,” he ordered. It might be his last order; the final order given on board a doomed ship.

“Seven left,” the radar operator said. “One of them has gone off course.”

Jackson blinked. Why had that happened? “Brace for impact,” Morrigan’s voice said, over the intercom. The chattering of the Metalstorm close-in defensive system was overpoweringly loud, hammering out thousands of rounds towards the French missiles. “Impact in...”

There was a colossal explosion, far too close for comfort. Jackson’s first thought was that they’d been hit, but if that had happened it would be unlikely that they would have survived to wonder about it. “What happened?” He demanded. “Report!”

“One of the missiles was triggered by the Metalstorm,” the operator said. His voice was shocked. “Sir, I think we’re going to make it.”

The blast must have taken out the other missiles, Jackson thought, checking the display. The AWACS feed reported no further missiles; the French aircraft were making a retreat. “Order the CAP to engage those aircraft,” he snapped. “Take them down. Take them all down!”

“Yes, Admiral,” Robertson said. The *Washington* shuddered again. “Orders have been sent.”

“We just got whacked by a suicidal pilot,” Morrigan snapped. “Minor damage to

the flight deck.”

Jackson cursed. “Can we recover aircraft?”

“I think so,” the Air Boss said, after a long moment. “We might want to put the fires out first.”

Jackson let out a long sigh of relief. Red and green icons on the display, both sides’ jet fighters, were dancing in combat, but the main thrust of the battle seemed to be over. He sucked in his breath, cold thoughts of revenge gliding through his mind. It wasn’t over; it wouldn’t be over until the *Charles de Gaulle* was sunk.

“Order the recon flights to probe along the flight path of the Rafales,” he said. “Their mission is to find the *Charles de Gaulle*. Put the Kitchen Sink squadron on alert; they’re to prepare to do unto them as they did unto us.”

“Yes, sir,” Robertson said. “We’ll find them soon; they can’t escape!”

Captain Rupert Potter gunned his afterburners, pushing the F-18 Hornet through a massive series of manoeuvres, following the French aircraft. At these speeds, he knew that it would be a stern chase; the F-18 had a slight advantage, but not one long enough to be decisive. If the French kept running, the Americans would have to launch missiles...and hope. So far ahead, the French aircraft couldn’t be seen and he wondered if they knew that the Americans were hunting them. He shook his head; they *had* to know. They’d only waited long enough to see what the strike had done to the *Washington* before bugging out...and they would have known that it had failed.

Not completely, he thought grimly, and checked his systems. If the catapult had been damaged, the *Washington*’s ability to launch aircraft would have been seriously compromised – perhaps even lost altogether. The British Empire was capable and had considerable experience with large ships, yes; but did it have the ability to rebuild parts of the *Washington*?

“Eye spy-one, I’m in missile range,” he said. “Request permission to open fire.”

There was a pause. The operator on the AWACS had to be calculating the odds of a successful hit, balanced with the simple possibility of the F-18s having to

abandon the chase. The *Charles de Gaulle* was somewhere along the French flight path – unless the French were being really gutsy – and the main problem with the Hornet was that it might not have the range to find the *Charles de Gaulle* and return to the *George Washington*.

“Permission granted,” the operator said, finally. “You are cleared to engage.”

It was a moment, Potter felt, that needed a strong patriotic soundtrack to accompany it. He selected the basic missile, locked it onto the closest Rafale, and fired. The AIM-120 AMRAAM lanced away from his plane, chasing the French aircraft.

“They’re taking evasive action,” his co-pilot said. The American planes could use the moment to close in on the French aircraft; ten of which were now...turning to face them. “Missile impact...now!”

Potter saw a flicker in the distance as the AIM-120 AMRAAM struck the French aircraft, destroying it. He glanced at his display; at these speeds they would be on the French defenders before they even knew it...

“Incoming fire,” the AWACS snapped. “Take evasive action!”

“Really?” Potter muttered, swinging the F-18 around to avoid a French MICA missile. “I never would have guessed.”

He scowled as he fired a second AMRAAM. The French aircraft was piloted by a pilot at least as capable as himself, he avoided the missile with ease, if not grace. The seeker head lost its lock and flew harmlessly into the sea. His targeting systems reported a lock-on and he fired automatically, hammering the French aircraft at practically point-blank range. The Rafale exploded and...

“Eagle-five and Eagle-seven are down,” the AWACS said. “SAR teams are on their way for both of them.”

Potter glanced down at his display and cursed. By their comrades bold sacrifice, the remaining French aircraft, the ones that had launched the Hellebores, had had time to make their escape. He shook his head in grim admiration; even as badly outnumbered as they’d been, the French had made them pay for the victory.

“See if I ever make fun of them again,” he said aloud, and led the way back to the *Washington*.

Captain Jean-Pierre Mauroy examined the transmitted reports from the aircraft with considerable dissatisfaction. They'd damaged the *Washington*, perhaps enough to prevent it from launching more aircraft, and they'd killed somewhere around three to four British aircraft carriers...but in the process they'd lost their own carriers and some other ships.

"At least we know the Harpoons are not as effective as Hellebores," he muttered to himself, as he tallied up the result of the brief and violent air battle. The roar of the landing Rafales drowned out his words. He'd given orders for them to be rearmed as quickly as possible; somehow the flotilla of superdreadnaughts surrounding the ship didn't fill him with confidence. If the *Washington* could still launch aircraft – or still had an attack force in the air – then the *Charles de Gaulle* was in serious trouble.

"Helm, get us out of here," he ordered. There was no longer any point in hiding; without any ability to hit the Americans – mentally he cursed Videzun's decision to keep two of the Hellebores in France – the *Charles de Gaulle* couldn't sneak around any longer. "Full speed; head for Toulon."

He ran mental calculations in his head. If they were lucky, they might manage to keep ahead of the *George Washington*, long enough to reach the gates to the Mediterranean Sea. The *George Washington* wouldn't pursue them there, he was sure; the massive super carrier would be an easy target for the heavy guns mounted on Spain and what had been Morocco, back when the world made sense.

"Ah, Captain?" His exec asked. He'd been appointed by Videzun, which was one reason why Mauroy didn't like the man. "If we do that, we'll leave our escorts behind?"

He phrased it as a question. Mauroy wasn't sure if it was an attempt to annoy him or a search for reassurance. "Yes, I know," he said. "Tell me; against Harpoon missiles, how much good do you think they'll be?"

The Exec's face fell. "Yes, Captain," he said. "They won't be any good at all."

Mauroy's face darkened. "The Americans have just been poked in the eye," he said. "As soon as they've finished licking their wounds, they'll come for us...and we'd better be a long way away from them by then, understand?" He didn't wait for any comment. "Helm; move us out."

“Yes, Captain,” the helmsman said. Mauroy watched through the porthole as the superdreadnaughts were slowly left behind. “Moving to full speed now.”

Mauroy nodded nervously. The *Charles de Gaulle* had had enough problems with its reactors to make him very worried; if the reactor chose this moment to fail, it would spell their doom. He imagined being becalmed within the Atlantic; they would almost certainly have to surrender to the Americans when they showed up, just to have competent people helping to stabilise the reactor. It wasn’t supposed to be able to meltdown...but Mauroy knew better than to trust the experts. What did they know?

“Have the aircraft turned around as fast as possible,” he said, thinking as fast as he could. Launching the aircraft was asking for trouble; the Americans would be more likely to see them if they had aircraft hovering above them. “If the Americans show up, I want our remaining aircraft launched as soon as possible.”

“We took minor damage to one of the catapults,” Captain Robin Brooks, Chief Engineer, reported. “Some minor damage to the hull; some injuries caused by an exploding helicopter – *thank God* it wasn’t armed. I think we came though pretty well.”

“For the first super carrier to engage in carrier-to-carrier war,” Jackson agreed. He smiled at Morrigan. “You should be proud of your crew.”

“I am,” Morrigan said. There was a deep undercurrent of anger in his voice. “I want the French cocksuckers dead.”

“No argument,” Jackson said. “We have to find them first.” He wished, not for the first time, that he could talk properly to Admiral Anderson. The British-American had a good understanding of carrier operations. “The French carriers were sunk, right?”

“All seven,” Sonja said. “Their superdreadnaughts seemed to be able to almost shrug off a Harpoon, although we think that we killed some of the command crew on the ships. One was destroyed; two were damaged. On the other hand, killing the carriers is just like stamping on bugs.”

“What a nice analogy,” Jackson said. He smiled with a certain grim look. “We are going after the *Charles de Gaulle*.”

A ripple of anticipation ran around the room. “Admiral,” O’Reilly said, “I know that I want them too, but don’t we have to worry about the New Model Army?”

Jackson nodded. It was a good point, and without a proper staff, it was O’Reilly’s job to make it. “Yes, Commander,” he said. “You’re right; that is a problem. Fortunately, we can move some of our ASW assets to the *Arnold*” – he refused to use the ship’s full name – “and then Admiral Anderson can escort the rest of the transports to the United Kingdom.”

He paused for a moment, inviting comment. None came. “Captain Morrigan, please set course along the flight path of the French aircraft,” he said. “Inform me when the recon aircraft find something.”

An alarm rang in the bridge of the *Charles de Gaulle*. Mauroy moved as fast as he could, cursing. Nearly an hour after leaving behind the superdreadnaughts, he’d dared to hope that they had escaped the *Washington*.

“What do we have?” He demanded. “What have you seen?”

“Long-range recon aircraft, American design,” Commander Hachay said. He tapped the screen, pointing to a blinking icon. As they watched, it changed to reveal that the aircraft was transmitting. “Sir, they’ve seen us.”

“Battle stations,” Mauroy snapped. “Sound the alert; launch all fighters.” He glanced down at the screen; the American aircraft was out of range of the *Charles de Gaulle*’s missiles. “Order the lead fighter to deal with the American aircraft, as fast as possible.”

“That’s the *Charles de Gaulle*, all right,” Sonja Robertson said. The display screen showed a ship that was as out of place in Timeline B as the *Washington* itself was. “Sir, she’s launching her fighters.”

Jackson nodded. “Felix wasn’t that keen on the whole idea,” he said. In fact, Anderson had muttered something about cowboys. “We have to deal with her quickly. Order the Kitchen Sink and the Eagles in to engage.”

“Yes, sir,” Sonja said. “Sir, what about the French superdreadnaughts?”

Jackson checked the AWACS radar stream. The seventeen dreadnaughts were beating their own retreat, running from Anderson's force or from the *Washington*. That was lucky, he supposed; none of the carriers was in a real state for a battle. The Royal North American Navy might have lost the battle, after all the effort.

"Leave them," he ordered, after a moment. "We can deal with them later, if we have to. I see no need to waste missiles."

"Yes, sir," Sonja said. The roar of aircraft engines echoed through the ship. "Kitchen Sink force launching now."

Captain Rupert Potter had never expected to fight a real combat, jet to jet. Iraqis and Iranians had simply lacked the competence of NATO and the other handful of modern states; the Iraqis hadn't even launched a single air attack against American forces. The USN and USAF had held countless practice duels, but they weren't quite *real*.

"Eagle-one, he's on your six," his co-pilot snapped. Potter acted on instinct, throwing the Hornet across the sky. The French missile narrowly missed him; his desperate manoeuvre had barely saved his life. He swept up, just above the surface of the water, and fired a missile of his own.

The dark shape of the *Charles de Gaulle* loomed in front of him and he swept aside to avoid a collision, staying low to avoid the carrier's own weapons. The carrier wasn't holding anything back; missiles and gunfire roared off its decks, firing at the American aircraft. He had a clear shot at a French aircraft and fired, scoring a direct hit...and then had to swoop out of the way of a French aircraft. The pilot must have used all of his missiles; he only fired at the Hornet with guns.

"Take that," Potter snapped, sparing no thought for the pilot. A single missile destroyed his aircraft, killing the Frenchman before he had time to escape. "Eagle-one, fox-two!"

"Excellent shooting," the AWACS said. "Stand by; you have clear skies."

Potter checked his scopes out of habit. The last time an AWACS had said that an F-117 had appeared out of nowhere, launching missiles it wasn't supposed to be carrying. The drill had been unfair, some of the pilots had protested – the ones who no longer had real careers. *Expect the unexpected*, the instructors had warned

them – this time, there were no longer any French aircraft in the sky.

“Kitchen Sink is inbound,” the AWACS said. “Cover them.”

Against what? Potter thought. The Viking squadron, the Kitchen Sink, no longer faced opposition. He watched as a salvo of Harpoon missiles were launched, lancing in towards a ship that was now defenceless...and helpless.

Mauroy swore badly as the last of the Rafales was wiped out of the air. They’d fought well and hard, but in the end they hadn’t been enough. Seven Hornets and the American recon plane had been destroyed, but the *Washington* had always had more planes than the *Charles de Gaulle*.

“Blasted Americans,” Mauroy muttered. “Must they always have bigger ships than anyone else?”

“They’ve overcompensating,” his exec said. “Most Americans are bad lovers.”

Mauroy gave him a cross look. It wasn’t the time for bad jokes. “Transmit the compressed signal to *Contre-Admiral* François Videzun,” he snapped, cursing the Admiral in the only way left to him. Videzun had to know what had happened here. The communications officer nodded. “Then contact the Americans. Inform them...that we surrender.”

“You must be joking,” his exec said. “The French Navy never surrenders.”

Mauroy ignored him. “Do it,” he snapped. “Now.”

“It’s too late,” the weapons operator said. “They’re launching Harpoon missiles.”

“Activate all point defence signals,” Mauroy snapped. “Transmit the signal again...”

“Too late,” the weapons operator said. “They’re overloading the system and...”

Seven Harpoon missiles struck the *Charles de Gaulle*. Two of them slammed into the superstructure and killed Mauroy and his crew. The others slammed into the main hull, blasting it apart. Many of the carrier’s weapons had been removed, but it made no difference to the final result; a tearing series of explosions. The fuel

supplies caught fire, adding to the damage, and blowing the bottom out of the hull.

As the American planes watched from high above, the wreckage of the *Charles de Gaulle* slipped slowly beneath the waves.

Chapter Forty-Five: The Empire Kicks Arse

Bourbon Palace

Paris, France (TimeLine B)

Defeat.

Contre-Admiral François Videzun strove as best as he could to find some positive side to the disaster, but he knew that it was a waste of time. The *Washington* might have been damaged – or it might not have been – but if it could still launch aircraft, it was still dangerous. He shook his head slowly; with the British carriers still intact – and the French ones at the bottom of the sea, it didn't matter if the *Washington* was destroyed or not. Losing the *Charles de Gaulle* hurt – without it, there was no chance of a naval victory.

Videzun replayed the final moments of the compressed transmission, looking for a bright side. There wasn't one; he was smart enough not to lie to himself. It was a disaster, and...there was no way to avoid the consequences. For a moment, he considered sending the entire French Navy against the *Washington* – the data burst did indicate that Harpoons were less capable than Hellebore missiles – but he knew that it would be futile. The superdreadnaughts would be sunk by the British carriers – and even if the British ran out of weapons, the *Washington* and the converted battlecruisers could simply outrun them.

He picked up the phone and dialled a number from memory. It was a dedicated line – any other number would have cut the connection automatically – and it didn't ring for long before it was answered. The Crown Prince's voice hummed down the line, with a disregard for security that Videzun found terrifying. If an English spy managed to hack into the line...

"Your Highness," he said. There wasn't an easy way to phrase it. "Your Highness, the attack on the *Washington* has failed."

He was amazed that he couldn't hear the shouting through the palace walls. "You have failed me," the Crown Prince shouted. It would have been reassuring under other circumstances; the cold interior could be melted. At the moment, it wasn't reassuring at all. "How bad were the losses?"

"All of the carriers," Videzun said, and left it at that. If the Crown Prince worked

out that that included the *Charles de Gaulle* lost – well, there would be time for explaining that later. “Your Highness, we must withdraw from Britain now.”

He glanced up at the map. The first French attack had no hope of reaching any port that would be unloading the New Model Army. The second...*might* be able to reach Liverpool, but only if the British let it through. He doubted that they would – and even if they did, it might be an elaborate trap.

Damn them, he thought. The British of this era had made some serious preparations for invasion, far more than any of his timeline had done; invasion, through losing command of the sea, must have been a far more realistic concern to those in Timeline B. Their submarines were making dents in the French ships, and that was impeding their advance. The RFC hadn’t been wiped out, although it had been damaged, and the three Rafales remaining couldn’t handle all the precision bombing...even if the bombs themselves held out.

“If they do,” he muttered to himself. The Crown Prince made a strangled noise. “Your Highness?”

“You have lost me my ships,” the Crown Prince said. “François Videzun; give me back my ships!”

Who would have thought that he knew the classics? Videzun thought absently. “They can retake Britain,” he said, as calmly as he could. “If they do that, it gives them nothing beyond Britain itself – provided we save as much as we can of the army and the navy. If we lose either one of them, the Russians will knife us in the back.”

“My diplomacy has prevented any chance of that,” the Crown Prince snapped. His voice sharpened. “The Russians would never dare to break such a solemn oath.”

Videzun spoke bluntly. “Yes, they will,” he said, wishing that he had the nerve to give the Crown Prince a good spanking. He needed it. “If we look weak, they will come rolling over the border...and destroy the Empire.” He paused. “Pull the ships back to the Baltic and the Mediterranean,” he urged. “Bring the army back to France. We can still end this with honour.”

“No,” the Crown Prince said. “You know nothing of battles within our world. The troops stay in Britain.”

He put the phone down. Videzun was grimly certain that he was already issuing

orders to the army staff; not to retreat or to dig in to Britain. Couldn't he see? Unless the army dug in, it would be destroyed! Unless it retreated, it would be destroyed! If it kept trying to advance, it would stretch itself too thin...and be destroyed. He picked up his radio, to ask Jacqueline Petal, but then he remembered that there had been a decline in her work recently.

"Lucky Belen," he said, absently. With Belen and Lavich still on their honeymoon, there was very little that he could do...except one thing. "I hate changing plans in midstream," he muttered. "This is going to be worse than anything else."

Without further ado, Videzun picked up his radio again and placed one single call. "Doctor," he said, "I have a task for you."

He listened to the shocked objections, and then waved his hand in unconcern. "Believe me, Doctor," he said. "The situation cannot get any worse than it already is."

Liverpool/Oxford/London

United Kingdom (TimeLine B)

If there was one thing Anderson had been worried about, as the fleet approached the Celtic Sea under cover of darkness, it had been enemy submarines and superdreadnaughts. His improved radar, and the *George Washington's* AWACS, made him certain that the enemy ships weren't about, but he was still worried. Admiral Jackson – whose success against the French super carrier had been a big shot in the arm to the crew's morale – had tried to reassure him, but he was still concerned.

Submarines, however, were another story. They'd been developing sonar for the ten months since the *George Washington* had arrived, but it still wasn't a system they fully understood. Two submarines had been detected and sunk – and the nightmare was that they might have fired upon a British submarine instead of a French one.

"You're still worried," Caesar said. His dark face glittered when he opened his mouth, the moonlight glinting off his white teeth. "Think about what we did to their carriers."

Anderson smiled. The open battle had done more to pull the 'Americans' and the

‘quasi-Americans’ into one unit than anything else. “I have thought about it,” he said. “The problem, of course, is where we land.”

An Admiral was not supposed to confide in anyone. Right now, he felt the need. “We’re nearly at Liverpool now,” he said. “We have the transports, safe and well, and the New Model Army. So...why don’t I feel safe?”

“Perhaps the *George Washington* is about to reveal itself as a French ship and open fire,” Caesar said. Anderson glared at him, and then realised that he was joking. “I think you’re worried about your decision to land at Liverpool.”

“It’ll take at least two days to get the New Model Army down to Oxford, where the lines have been forming,” Anderson said. He was glad that the French hadn’t attempted to take any more cities by force, but at the same time unhappy; that meant that the New Model Army would face a French army that hadn’t been that badly worn down. How much could the French have moved to England in the sixteen days they’d had? With some preplanning, they could have moved enough for long-term combat operations...

“If I had risked the landing at Southampton,” he said, and shook his head. The proof that alternate histories actually had some use didn’t mean that it was any use to him personally. He peered out into the darkness, seeing the tiny flickers of light revealing flaws in the blackout curtains or other problems.

“The New Model Army would have had to cut itself out of the city,” Caesar said. “For what it’s worth; I think you made the right decision.”

“Thanks,” Anderson said wryly. He checked his watch; only half an hour until they could dock the transports at Liverpool. “How long until dawn?”

Caesar shrugged. “Three, four hours,” he said. “You know what English weather is like.”

“And at that point we can expect major air attacks,” Anderson said. “Oh joy.”

“Oh joy indeed,” Caesar said. “Do you think it’s always going to be this way?”

Anderson lifted an eyebrow. “Endless fighting over small patches of land?” He asked. “You know, from the other history, I would have thought that we’d been lucky. Three massive empires, four independent states, two puppet states...rather different from hundreds of little annoying countries...”

Caesar nodded slowly. “And more technology,” he said. “More capability to do themselves harm.”

“That too,” Anderson said. “That too.”

If there was one thing that living in the French Court taught a person, it was how to read between the lines, both of written and unwritten works. The sheer silence on the subject of the naval battle – and the direct order from the Crown Prince to move forward – told General Leblanc more than the official briefing. If there had been a victory, the radio would have been gloating...and if there had been a draw, if honours had been even, he would have been informed.

That meant that there had been a disaster...and that the New Model Army had managed to land. The French air force had directed constant attacks against Liverpool, but the RFC had suddenly become stronger – boosted by the addition of carrier aircraft, perhaps? All of a sudden, the French forces had been reduced back to limited sight; the fog of war had enveloped Liverpool.

And it was quiet, too quiet. He lifted his binoculars and peered towards Oxford, home of a famous university and a particularly bloody-minded militia division. In the long run, his strategy of holding the country would have to work – because a direct assault on all of the cities would have simply destroyed the cities and cost him all of his men.

“The RFC is launching another flight,” his aide said. “They’re patrolling back over Oxford, at least nine aircraft.”

General Leblanc muttered under his breath, several words that he would have been slapped for using in front of a lady. “What are they doing?” He asked grimly. He checked the map of the British railway system again and cursed; the entire country was dotted with railways and their supports. With some effort, the British could have placed the entire New Model Army in their path.

“Perhaps it’s their final aircraft,” his aide suggested. “Perhaps they simply don’t have the ability to launch more.”

General Leblanc snorted and stamped off towards the scouting tent. The scouts, some of them mounted on horses, waited there. “Here are your orders,” he snapped. “Travel around Oxford and report.”

He watched as the scouts, both walking and riding, set off. He knew that the horses would probably lead to them being discovered, but there wasn't much that he could do about that. He needed information...and there were only a handful of ways to get it.

A distant explosion in the air marked the death of an aircraft. He wondered whose side it had been on; British or French. Did it matter; the wonder-aircraft from the *Charles de Gaulle* had been recalled to their carrier, except two that were back in France. What did that mean?

"My General, there is a disturbance," a watchman shouted. His face paled, from his position up the tower he could see for further than General Leblanc. "My General, there is an entire army of land ironclads moving this way!"

General Leblanc cursed bitterly. Perhaps it was the New Model Army, or perhaps the factories in Manchester had turned out enough land ironclads to equip their militia. It didn't matter; the simple fact was that they were there...and that they were coming his way. The noise of incoming shellfire shocked him; the British were *firing* at them!

"How the hell did we miss them moving heavy guns?" His aide demanded. "The aircraft should have seen them and..."

"It doesn't matter," General Leblanc said, as the second round of shells smashed down. "Get our people into defensive position, *now!*"

Private Bruce Hanuman loved his tank. It was designed for one simple task; crushing French infantry under its treads, and it was so much easier to drive and fight with than being an infantryman in the trenches. His success in the battles in New Spain had won him command of a tank, just in time to join the battles in Britain.

"Move us forward in line with the others," he said, watching through his periscope. "Gunners; fire as soon as you see the whites of their song sheets."

"They won't be singing *Hail to the Emperor* here," the driver said. Unlike many Quebecois, he hated the French; they'd killed his parents during the run-up to war. *Hail to the Emperor*, the French anthem, was only sung in Quebec, outside the French Empire itself. "They'll be singing *God Save the King* as soon as they see

us coming.”

Hanuman shrugged, peering through as the explosions from the shells died away or headed further east. The idea had been simple; the self-propelled guns would mount an impromptu barrage, while the tanks themselves charged the lines. If the French cowered, the tanks would get them; out in the open, the artillery would have a good chance of killing them.

“There,” he said, as the French lines came into stark relief. He smiled; the French clearly hadn’t been expecting a major offensive. They’d only built *one* trench, after all. He was certain that they would have built stronger defences around Dover and Maidstone, but for the moment...

“Firing, sir,” the lead gunner said, and the tank’s machine guns opened fire. Hanuman swivelled the periscope from side to side, watching as the bullets slashed across the French trench, careful to keep an eye out for antitank tanks. The French had concentrated on building to that design...and it was a right pain in the arse for tank attacks. As it was, they had to assume that every French tank was an antitank design, until they knew differently.

“Die, you bastards,” the driver snarled, as they broke over the trench, the gunners firing up and down it. Hanuman almost laughed; they *really* hadn’t been expecting trouble...and then a tank exploded. Three Frenchmen with bazooka-like weapons, although he could see some differences, were firing at them.

“Kill them,” he snapped, and the gunners fired at them. Hanuman shuddered as the French bodies were chopped to bloody gore by the bullets. Their weapons, abandoned, were picked up by the British infantry supporting their advance.

“Some Frenchmen are surrendering,” the radio buzzed. “Accept their surrenders.”

“Bastards,” Hanuman cursed. *He* thought that the surrenders should be refused, refused with extreme prejudice if needs be. “Watch them carefully,” he ordered. “They blink, they’re history.”

“You’ve been watching too many of those movies from the weird ship,” his driver observed. “Personally, I like the *Star Trek* ones myself.”

“Tripe,” Hanuman said flatly. “Keep watching for trouble; you don’t think that they’re all going to just give up, do you? This was the vanguard; the rest of the bastards are somewhere to the east.”

“The rest of the bastards are somewhere to the east,” Colonel Magadan said.
“General...?”

General Smith considered. The French occupation looked impressive – on paper – but it wasn’t the perfect red-shaded areas on the map. How could it be? Even ten times the number of troops the French were supposed to have couldn’t have held down the countryside, even with most of the civilians staying out of the fighting.

“We have to round them all up quickly,” he said, and checked the map. The New Model Army had disembarked, moved itself as quickly as it could to a hidden base, and then attacked as soon as dawn had risen. They’d smashed the French vanguard, but he knew that there would be more Frenchmen, either besieging London or Southampton, or marching up to engage them.

“Yes, sir,” Magadan said. Smith smiled; it was the safe thing to say, he supposed. “Perhaps if we were to concentrate on attacking the airfields they are using to attack us?”

“That’s the Royal Flying Corps’ job,” Smith reminded him. The RFC had been firmly subordinated to General Highlander. With his death, they’d been trying to assert their independence – no matter how much it might have hurt the defence of Great Britain. “Order them to concentrate on the enemy airfields.”

“Yes, sir,” Magadan said. He left, heading to the radio tent, allowing Smith a moment to figure out what to do next. The problem, of course, was that the enemy would have time to react to him – even with the *George Washington’s* drones providing him with surveillance. They were digging in at Dover, even taking in reinforcements despite carrier attempts to interdict them, and cracking *that* line would make New Spain seem like a bloodless victory.

“We’ll move to relieve London,” he decided, and summoned his staff officers. The French had built powerful lines around the city, just to prevent the British from breaking out, but were they designed to stop someone on the outside?
“Gentlemen; we are going to lift the siege of London.”

“Yes, sir,” they said. Magadan returned and nodded to him. “The RFC has its orders.”

“Good,” Smith said. “We’re going to London, then we’re going to Dover,” he

said.

Magadan asked a question. “What about the forces in the Cambridge region?” He asked. “Aren’t they a problem as well?”

Smith shook his head. “Local militia has them under control,” he said. “The ones near Dover and London, however, are still dangerous; we need to deal with them.”

“Yes, sir,” Magadan said, and headed off to issue the orders.

Smith stared down at the map grimly. “What would I do, in their place?” He asked himself. “Answer; dig in and prepare to repel attack. If so...”

He called Magadan back. “Ask the *George Washington* to prepare to watch for any heavy troop movements from London,” he said. “They should be trying to concentrate their own forces, tempting us to attack them.”

“Yes, sir,” Magadan said. “Sir, if they do that, we can reoccupy Britain – most of Britain – without a fight.”

Smith shook his head. “Most battles are won by crushing the opposing army,” he said. “That’s what we have to do...and what our enemy will be trying to make difficult.” He paused. “And if he makes it impossible, then that’s it.”

Chapter Forty-Six: Royal Prerogative

Bourbon Palace

Paris, France (TimeLine B)

Prime Minister Vincent Pelletier sat beside the Emperor's bed, wondering what it was all worth now. The army was preparing to fight a final desperate battle in England – and Pelletier knew that it would lose. The navy was falling back...and Pelletier knew that that would no longer matter – if the *George Washington* got involved. No matter what Videzun said, Pelletier had no doubt that the *Washington* carried weapons like the *Charles de Gaulle* – and with the *Charles de Gaulle* sunk, there was nothing preventing the use of such weapons on France and French ships.

He looked down at the still body of the Emperor, feeling a certain kind of tenderness. The Emperor had dominated his court for so long that everyone had gotten used to him; France wasn't Russia, where it wasn't uncommon to have several Tsars per decade. The French had been quietly relieved at the ongoing internal strife; it stopped the Tsars from looking west towards France and thinking...yum. But then stability, of a sort, had come with the last Tsar – and the current one was just as bloodthirsty.

“Can't count on the Russians for anything,” he muttered, looking down at the Emperor. He had been a hard man to love at times, if not to follow, but there had been no doubt that he'd had the well-being of the Empire at heart. His son...his son played sadistic games with a woman, while the Empire was slowly heading towards anarchy.

He sighed. What authority did he have left? It was the great compromise between the nobles and the commoners that prevented revolution and civil unrest. The Prime Minister served at the discretion of the Emperor – and passed out of politics when the Emperor died. For the moment, Pelletier was suspended somewhere in between; working for the Emperor, but side-lined by the Crown Prince.

I wonder if we'll see Prime Minister Videzun, he thought, and shook his head slowly. It would be illegal to appoint Videzun as Prime Minister – he was a noble, seeing he was married to Jasmine, and in the third tier of succession as well – but the Crown Prince wouldn't care. Like many young nobles, he saw only the power of the throne – and not the effort required to maintain it. An Emperor had to be

careful – if his ambitions included being an Emperor tomorrow...and it looked as if the Crown Prince would be anything, but.

“There’s going to be a rebellion,” he said aloud, addressing the Emperor’s prone form. Doctor Mimi Rouge came in and checked his form, and then injected him with a needle. He waited until she’d left, wondering what she’d given him; another injection to maintain his strength, or something else, something more sinister?

I’m getting paranoid, he thought. The French Court didn’t operate through assassinations, but the French in the other timeline seemed to use assassinations as naturally as political debate. Would Videzun have stooped so low as to poison the Emperor? His lips twitched; if he had, it had cost him his ship...and most of his influence with the Crown Prince.

“We can’t afford this sort of strife,” he said grimly. “The Viceroys are talking to the industrialists; they want to depose him. It won’t take long sire...and then the unbroken line of descent will be broken.”

He scowled. It was no longer within his concern. His service was at the discretion and pleasure of Emperor Napoleon XI; whoever held the throne after the Emperor died would no longer want to keep him around. With the Viceroys talking to the industrialists – the first and second tiers of succession to the throne respectively – it wouldn’t be long...and then the chaos would be upon them. For a long moment, he thought of simply trying to take control and pretending that the Emperor was healthy, but he knew that that wouldn’t work for long. There were procedures in place – he’d worked many of them out himself – to prevent such a trick and...

The Emperor moved. Pelletier felt the movement and looked down; the Emperor was stirring. One of Pelletier’s hands was on the Emperor’s; he felt it curving around him, like a child’s hand. He stared at the tired face, unable to move for joy and horror, and then smiled as the Emperor’s eyes opened.

“Sire,” he said, as the Emperor’s eyes fixed on him. It took no effort at all to place sincerity in his voice; he meant every last word. “I remain at your service.”

The Emperor’s voice was harsh and cracked from weeks of disuse. “Water,” he said firmly. “Water.”

“At once, sire,” Pelletier said, too pleased to even consider how dangerous that might be for the Emperor. He scurried over to the sink and produced a glass of

sterile water, freshly boiled, then cooled down to the right temperature. “Your majesty’s water.”

The Emperor sipped gratefully. He tried to sit up, but failed; his body was weaker than it should have been. Pelletier found himself grinning with sheer relief; he was alive! The Emperor finished his glass and looked up. Pelletier met his eyes, and then lowered his head.

“You seem pleased to see me,” the Emperor said. His eyes were as bright as ever. “Anyone would think that I’d died.”

Pelletier couldn’t keep the grin from his face. “Sire, I have never been so pleased to see you as I am now,” he said, and meant every word. The Emperor’s eyes narrowed; shameless flattery had never been Pelletier’s style. “Sire, how strong are you feeling?”

“What’s been happening in my...how long has it been?” The Emperor asked. “Where am I, coming to think of it?”

Pelletier answered the simpler question first. “This is the palace medical wing,” he said. “It’s been modified for your presence. Sire; all hell has broken loose.”

Some of the light faded from the Emperor’s eyes. “No peace, then,” he said. “And Louis?”

Pelletier winced. How could he explain the Crown Prince’s actions? The Emperor had never been known for punishing the messenger, but this was something different from the normal run of bad news. The Emperor caught his hesitation and frowned at him, even commanding some authority from his sickbed.

“It’s been two weeks,” Pelletier said. How could so much have changed in that short space of time? He explained everything, leaving nothing out, even the loss of the *Charles de Gaulle* to the American warship. “And now we’re on the brink of nemesis,” he concluded.

“Sealion was launched then,” the Emperor said. It wasn’t a question. “Too much risked for too little,” he said. “And now...?”

Pelletier drew in a breath. “There’s bad news about His Highness,” he said, and outlined everything he’d discovered. “Sire...what are we going to do?”

There was a sharp gasp from the door. “What are you doing?” Doctor Rouge demanded. “Your Majesty, you should be resting...”

“Silence,” the Emperor said. “I have work to do.” He glared at her as if he held her responsible for everything. “Fetch me something to eat, preferably something warm and welcoming.”

Doctor Rouge looked at him for a long moment. “Yes, Your Majesty,” she said finally, and slipped out to see to it. The Emperor watched her go, then turned back to Pelletier.

“My Prime Minister,” he said formally, “do you still believe that we can win this war?”

Pelletier shook his head. “No, sire,” he said. “If we continue, then we will be lost.”

The Emperor sighed. “Summon the inner council at once,” he said, sitting up and swinging his legs over the side of the bed. He seemed dizzy for a long chilling moment, and then stood up carefully, leaning on Pelletier. “And then...I’m going to have a very long talk with my wayward son.”

The tone in his voice was so icy that Pelletier almost felt sorry for the Crown Prince.

The position was humiliating, just a few steps short of rape. Bent helplessly over the bed, her hands firmly handcuffed to the side of the bed, Jacqueline Petal couldn’t move as the Crown Prince thrust deep inside her. There was no romance at all, no attempt to arouse her, just his steady thrusts. She whimpered as he forced himself deeper and deeper inside her, finally blasting out a stream of semen inside her. She gasped, which he took for pleasure, simply leaving her in that position while he went for a shower.

“I trust that you enjoyed that,” he said, as he came back from the shower. Jacqueline couldn’t move; the pain in her body was too much for her. He slapped her rump with what she had the horrifying suspicion was genuine affection, and then carefully undid the handcuffs.

His voice took on a harder edge as she tried to move. “Well, did you?” He

demanded. One hand squeezed a breast hard enough to make it darken with trapped blood. "Did you?"

"Yes," Jacqueline stammered. She'd had enough, she couldn't go on; she'd made her plans, and no matter how scared she was, she had determined to end it all.

"Yes, love; I enjoyed it."

"Splendid," the Crown Prince said. His air of bonhomie was back; she was starting to wonder if he suffered from schizophrenia. There had been times when he'd been ready to take her again at once, but this time seemed to be different. Perhaps the marks all over her body had deterred him from taking her; if all of her scars had started to bleed.

The thought made her sick and she retched, barely managing not to be sick. "I'm sorry," she gibbered, suddenly terrified of him. "I'm sorry..."

The Crown prince managed to seem unaffected. "Go shower and wash the blood off," he said. Jacqueline looked at the bed and noticed that there were bloody marks on it, her blood. "Go," he snapped.

Jacqueline bowed and left, not trusting herself to speak. It was all she could do to walk; first cramp and then the pains in her body came to haunt her. She half-limped, half-stumbled, over to the bathroom, closing the door behind her. It had no lock, something that had puzzled her the first time he'd brought her to his rooms...before he revealed himself for what he truly was.

She slipped to the floor and lay there, almost blacking out. Only sheer willpower kept her going, and the knowledge of what he would do to her if he saw her like this forced her forward, climbing back to her feet and staggering into the shower. Like a small portion of men, he was turned on by female pain; sex wasn't any good for him unless he'd taken it by force.

The water poured down on her and she screamed. It was far too hot for her, even without the scars and open wounds on her body. She heard his deep laughter and looked up, expecting to see him in the room, but he was still outside. She felt like crying; did it ever end? He didn't even hate her; he just used her like she was a living doll...

"Enough," she said, and summoned up the determination that had forced her into intelligence. "Enough."

She stepped out of the shower, shuddering at all of the blood. It must have crusted on her skin; it looked as if half of her blood had been lost, even though she didn't feel light-headed. Amazingly, the sight gave her new determination; she forced her way out and pulled on a bathrobe. She buckled it tight around her waist, and then changed her mind; she had to look attractive. She opened it to show a little cleavage, and then a little more, and then adjusted it to show more leg than she normally would under any circumstances.

The Crown Prince whistled at her as she came out, reading a report that had been sent to him by one of his spies. She smiled bravely at him, making an unspoken invitation with her body. His eyes lit up and she could almost see his thoughts; perhaps Court could be put off for a while.

"Make a show," he ordered. She'd been forced to striptease for him before, along with other acts she shuddered to even think about; the demand came as no surprise. "Find your items."

As if I was a pet, Jacqueline thought, with sudden brilliant anger. Her anger fuelled her determination; she swung her way over to the small bag he'd given her, merely for his amusement. Normally, it contained a dildo; now...something else. She carried it in her hand, bumping and grinding as if she was on an erotic video, finally bending over in front of him, giving him a look down her front. His eyes followed her every move as she shrugged off the bathrobe, and then she started to open the handbag.

"Now," he said, too excited to continue watching the striptease. "Now, I said."

Jacqueline nodded and held the handbag, allowing her hand to slip inside. His eyes followed her...and then grew wide as she pulled out the small pistol inside. He started to say something, but Jacqueline fired before he could do anything. The silenced pistol made a neat little hole in the front of his head; he fell backwards and died before he could say anything past a slight gurgle.

Jacqueline felt her legs give out and she fell to the ground. Alarm raced through her; even for a 'silenced' pistol there was some noise; someone might have heard it...and she had one other person to deal with. Pulling herself back to her feet, feeling an inhuman calm come over her, she started to dress herself, as if it was a normal day.

No one came to investigate any strange noises. She wasn't surprised; she'd screamed aloud more than once when he'd been...alive, and no one had come.

Perhaps they hadn't heard anything, or perhaps they'd just thought that he was beating her, or something. It didn't matter; all that mattered was getting out of the suite, and moving across the palace.

The guards at the entrance to the suite didn't react at all to her departure; they knew better than to bother the Crown Prince for anything short of a real emergency. The Palace seemed quieter, as if it was holding its breath; she was sure that she looked ghastly, but no one reacted at all. She moved through rooms and corridors, unseen and unwatched, and no one saw her at all.

"Marvellous," she breathed. She knew, at some level, that she'd given everything up, but it didn't really matter, not any longer. The door to yet another of the ubiquitous suites loomed in front of her and she smiled, before tapping on the door. Her target might not be awake, but his wife might be.

The door opened and Princess Jasmine looked out. Jacqueline almost shot her, but held herself back by sheer force of will. "Good morning," Jasmine said. Jacqueline almost giggled. "He's not up yet."

There was something so...humorous in the child-woman that Jacqueline laughed. "I have to talk to him," she said. Jasmine frowned up at her. "It's very important," Jacqueline said. "Please, would you fetch him?"

Jasmine performed a small curtsy. She was still young, still playing at being a wife rather than being a wife. She didn't look shocked or horrified or mistreated; she was almost pleased to notice that Videzun was treating her as a child, rather than as a desirable woman. Five years or so down the line, Jasmine would be truly gorgeous...but for now she was just a child.

Jacqueline forced the feeling down. It wasn't helping.

She heard Jasmine calling through a door. She shook her head in quiet amusement, considering the inanity of the situation, at least according to the rules and morals of Timeline A. Here...Jasmine *was* his legal wife, even if she wasn't even old enough to even know what sex was, let alone having it. Jasmine sounded...petulant at being denied access to a room, even for the best of reasons.

Someone needs to tell her about the birds and the bees, Jacqueline thought, and snickered. It became hysterical giggling; the shock of the last few hours was finally starting to wear off. Jasmine returned and saw her giggling; her pretty dark face crinkled with laughter and she giggled as well.

“He’ll be up in a minute,” Jasmine said. Jacqueline slipped her hand back inside her pocket, finding the gun and holding it in her hand. “What’s your romance with the Prince like? It’s very romantic; all the Ladies are jealous, you know. They talk about it all the time, about how nice it is that he’s chosen a commoner for his bed. What do you do with it anyway?”

Jacqueline shook her head, feeling pain flickering through her body. “It’s been terminated,” she said, and giggled. The thought was so inane; none of those Ladies had the slightest idea of what the Crown Prince was like – had been like. “Where is he?”

“Here, *Lieutenant*,” Videzun said. His tone was cross and grumpy, heavy with sleep and pregnant with menace. Jacqueline, for the first time in her career, found it hard to care. He’d gotten her into the mess, after all. “What’s so important that you had to wake me? Has something happened with the Crown Prince?”

There was so much that Jacqueline wanted to say to him, questions to ask, answers to demand. She didn’t do any of that; she merely pulled her hand out of her pocket, holding the gun. Before Videzun could react, she fired once at him, striking his head. Jasmine screamed, a chilling sound; a child suddenly brought face to face with reality. Her screams would definitely attract attention, perhaps from the maids – assuming that the queer family had them.

“I’m sorry,” Jacqueline said, and she was surprised to discover that she meant it. A pounding began at the door; it wouldn’t be long before the door was broken down. “I’m sorry.”

As the door burst inwards, she put the gun to her head and pulled the trigger for the final time.

Chapter Forty-Seven: The Changing of the Guard

Bourbon Palace

Paris, France (TimeLine B)

“He’s still alive,” Doctor Mimi Rouge said.

Prime Minister Vincent Pelletier looked down at the body, lying on the floor. The form of the late – apparently not so late - *Contre-Admiral* François Videzun was torn with blood. Part of his head was literally bleeding to death, the entire side of his face torn away. He looked up; no one had moved the other body.

The Emperor, sitting in a wheelchair pushed by a nervous guard, spoke crossly. “How *can* he be still alive?” He demanded. “He’s been shot in the head.”

“The bullet grazed the side of his skull,” Mimi said. Her voice was...shaken; Pelletier remembered that Videzun had been her commanding officer for a long time. “Head wounds are tricky things; they can be fatal very quickly, and even if they’re not they sometimes leave unpleasant surprises behind.”

Pelletier sighed. The discovery of Crown Prince Louis’s body had ended any hopes of solving the succession problem by ordering him to father an heir. The Legislature was already moving to impeach him; no one had told them of his death yet. Jacqueline Petal’s death only meant that there was no hope of an heir from that part of the family.

He felt sick. Mimi’s description of the wounds on Jacqueline Petal’s body had made the Emperor go very quiet. Jasmine, who’d seen the entire incident, had been sedated; she might well have saved her husband’s life with her screams. Or perhaps not – what sort of life could she have with a man who was mentally damaged?

“Tell me,” he said. “What sort of unpleasant surprises?”

Mimi had been working on Videzun’s wound, having dismissed the option of moving him at once. “It’s impossible to say,” she said. “He may never wake up at all. He may wake up and be perfectly fine. He may wake up as a child, or be emotionally disturbed, or mentally subnormal...there’s no way to tell.”

Pelletier, who rather suspected that Videzun had been emotionally disturbed – by power – anyway, said nothing. The Emperor spoke, in a voice like death. “Do what you can for him,” he ordered. Pelletier shivered; it was the tone used to condemn people to death. “Then have that body” – he waved a hand at Jacqueline Petal’s body – “removed from here and buried.”

Mimi looked up at him. “With what ceremony?” She asked. “She had friends on the ship.”

Most of whom are now below the sea, Pelletier thought grimly. “Whatever you like,” the Emperor said. His tone was still cold, still harsh. “We will place the blame on dissident Prussian factions.”

Pelletier bowed once. The Prussians remained the most restive under French rule, even though emigration to the Congo was a recognised right. They had a habit of trying to assassinate their Viceroy – and other important officials. Given the Crown Prince’s...habits, it would be more important to hide them than keeping the level of threat down. What did it matter if the people thought that the Prussians were better organised than they thought, set against the fear of revealing the Crown Prince’s habits?

“Now, I trust that the Ministers of Marine, Army and Diplomacy are waiting for me,” the Emperor said. He sounded more like his old self. “Wheel me there at once.”

“Yes, sire,” the guard said, and started to push the Emperor out of the door. Pelletier followed them, watching as people bowed to the Emperor as they passed him and his wheelchair. He grinned suddenly; a great many plans would have to be rethought and perhaps shelved indefinitely until the new situation was clarified.

“Admiral Quirion,” the Emperor said. “Report on the naval situation.”

“We are currently preparing a superdreadnaught-led attack on the American fleet,” Admiral Quirion said. Pelletier realised grimly that Admiral Quirion wasn’t keen on the idea. “As we have no carriers left, until the new ones are built, we have decided to wait until the Americans enter easy fighter range of France itself.”

“The bases on the English mainland are coming under attack constantly,” General Roche said. His dour countenance reflected his own concerns. “We can no longer

provide the sort of air support that General Leblanc needs. General Leblanc is pulling back into defensive positions now.”

“And sooner or later the interdiction will start taking a toll on our ability to supply General Leblanc,” Admiral Quirion said. “My Emperor...”

The Emperor drew himself up in his chair. “The attack on the British and American ships is to be cancelled,” he ordered. Pelletier sensed more than saw Admiral Quirion’s relief. “Have all of the ships pulled back to their main stations; do not attempt to confront any enemy warship.”

“Yes, sire,” Admiral Quirion said. “Sir, what about resupply?”

“Leave that for the moment,” the Emperor said. “General Roche; contact General Leblanc. His orders are simple; he’s to hold position and seek a lawful ceasefire under the laws of war.” He took a breath. “We are going to end this war, gentlemen.”

Pelletier coughed. “Sire, should we not withdraw the army?”

“It would be dangerous for the men to do that without some British guarantee not to attack them in crossing,” the Emperor said. He scowled. “We may have to surrender the army.”

Pelletier nodded. “I understand,” he said, mentally cursing the Crown Prince. Legally, the British would have little right to execute the entire army, but their homeland had been invaded. What price the laws of war then?

Three hours later, some communications had been established. The diplomats – who could argue without restarting the war – were arguing, allowing Pelletier some time to handle his other obligations as Prime Minister. Noting the Crown Prince’s death was a simple matter, but a lot of people had to be notified, starting with the Legislature. *They* would have the complex and difficult task of selecting the new Heir – unless the Emperor had more children – and they’d already gone into session.

We might see an answer in a month, he thought, and scribbled a quick note to Count Lavich. He and his new wife were still honeymooning – Pelletier felt a moment of envy – and would presumably not have the slightest idea how things

had changed. Lavich, who was in line for further ennoblement, would have to know; the Crown Prince had made some vague promises to him.

“Time for the final duty,” he muttered, and tapped neatly on the door. A weak voice shouted for him to come in, Pelletier opened the door and slipped inside. Princess Jasmine looked up at him from her bed; the medical nurse scowled at him.

“Please could you leave us alone,” Pelletier said. He understood; Jasmine had had a number of shocks recently, and he knew from experience that nurses were very discrete. He placed as much authority as he could into his voice. “Now, thank you.”

The nurse gave him one last unreadable look and departed. Pelletier wondered over to Jasmine’s bed and sat down on the chair next to it. The nurse had clearly been reading to her, something he suspected would have driven her mad. Jasmine looked up at him, her eyes dim.

“Is he going to be alright?” She asked. “What’s going to happen to him?”

Pelletier had his suspicions about Videzun’s role in recent events. Nothing had yet been proven. “We don’t know,” he said. He’d asked the doctor for an update, but she’d been uncertain about Videzun’s chances. He wasn’t sure how much he could tell Jasmine – and then he realised that the truth would be best.

“I don’t know,” he said. “He’s...unwell, Jasmine; his mind may have been damaged permanently.”

“But he’s my husband,” Jasmine wailed. “How can he die?”

“Enough,” Pelletier snapped. “I was wrong; we all were wrong. Listen; marrying you to him was a mistake, one that could have been a lot worse. We...treated you as a thing, as a person who merely held a rank in trust for your husband. We – I – was wrong. You did nothing to deserve it, nothing at all.”

Jasmine seemed about to speak. Pelletier held up a hand to silence her. “It wasn’t your fault that you were expected to grow up so fast, to mature so quickly,” he snapped. “That...he didn’t take advantage of you was sheer luck. You weren’t old enough to even be a formal-wife – and it was our mistake that put you there.

“Listen to me; be what you want to be,” he said, his tone darkening. “God knows;

he may die before the day is out. If he doesn't, you may consider divorcing him."

Jasmine's face furrowed. "I thought that was impossible," she said. "I don't know..."

"A lot can be done in a time of upheaval," Pelletier said. "The first Napoleon, the first real Prime Minister, proved that." He sighed. "Make what choices you want now, young lady; just be yourself."

Iron Palace

Moscow, Russia (TimeLine B)

Petrovich had been astonished to discover how the millions of conscripts were 'educated' and 'trained' in the ways of the Russian army. There was hardly any formal training, beyond the absolute basics; learning how to fire a rifle and saluting all officers. Not unlike the Tsar, Russian officers – mainly younger sons of noblemen – expected their men to practically worship them, or else.

Petrovich had gotten the cold sweats the first night after watching a disciplining session. The Red Army, even during Stalin's time, had never been so...evil to its own people. The Russian Army seemed to treat all of its men as potential sacrifices for the good of the Empire; after all, there were millions more where they came from. It seemed like a revolt would be easy...until he'd inspected all of the security precautions.

He smiled as he made his final preparations. Prince Rudolf, the Tsarist Secret Service Director, operated a fairly basic system; no weapons were handed out except under supervision. All of the nine formations guarding Moscow itself were from the Far East, except for one detachment of pure Russians, and to make matters even harder they all hated each other. Putting down peasant revolts was easy for them; the Russians and the Mongolians looked very different to one another.

Stefan had explained the entire system to him once. The Court Jews had a fully developed intelligence service of their own, learning as much as they could to protect themselves. It was impressive, he'd long-since concluded; they knew more about the other noblemen than the Tsar did. If one of them was too...anti-Semitic, they were more than willing to encourage the Tsar's paranoia in that direction. At the same time, they had to balance everything; they had to remain loyal to the Russian system, just in case the Tsar fell.

Petrovich had planned coups before; he understood the rules. In this case, it was simple; Moscow itself was the point failure source for the entire system. If something happened to the Tsar – and the person who had done that controlled Moscow – then he would have won. Whoever held Moscow held the Empire, which was one reason that none of the private armies were allowed near the city.

“Time to move,” he said, and tapped his radio once. The final items of salvaged American military technology, the tiny radios were utterly undetectable by Russian technology, and he’d given them to his loyalists. Nearly half of the *Stalingrad’s* survivors, as well as some of the more adventurous Court Jews, were waiting, accompanied by some of the Russian soldiers he’d subverted. Simply by treating them like men, he’d managed to acquire some total loyalty from them.

The explosion could be heard through the Iron Palace’s thick walls. The first explosion had been targeted on the barracks of the security force, the one that owed loyalty directly to the Emperor. The concept of any sort of suitcase bomb was unknown to the Russians; the blast had been easy to arrange. Petrovich smiled; he was playing from a rulebook that had been written in darker times.

He bent over to kiss Rebecca goodbye and slipped out of the room. The rest of his small force waited, hidden within the palace itself. The Russian nobles didn’t fight – that was for commoners – and no one had even blinked when some of the senior officers from the old *Stalingrad* had entered the palace.

“It’s time to move,” he said. He had to smile when he saw them; they were wearing American equipment with American flags. He’d wanted to wear their own body armour, but the plain fact was that the Americans did it better. “Everyone ready?”

Captain Yakov, who had been ennobled to a rank that was marginally better than being a commoner, smiled. “Yes, sir,” he said. “Let’s go.”

Petrovich nodded. “Let’s move,” he said, and led the way out of his rooms towards the Throne Room. He was certain that all of the explosions outside would have alarmed the guards, but there had been no way to move the force to the Throne Room without being noticed. A distraction had been required...

“A good thing they don’t have any electronic equipment,” Captain Yakov muttered. Petrovich could only agree with him; computers were difficult to fool. “Sir, there are guards ahead.”

The guards were turning towards them. “Fire,” Petrovich snapped, and blew the lead guard’s head off. The others opened fire, mowing down the guards with ease, and followed him to the main doors. Someone inside had heard the gunfire; a heavy iron shield was moving down like a portcullis, preventing entrance.

“Shaped charges,” one of his men muttered, proffering the item. Petrovich slapped it onto the iron blockage and everyone fell back as he set the timer before running back himself. The blast shattered the iron, blasting it back into the Throne Room, and Petrovich ran forward. The Tsar could be seen inside the room, lifting a heavy sword in one hand, a gun in the other.

“Idiot,” Petrovich muttered. The armour the Tsar wore *might* have been some good against the weapons in timeline B, but he rather doubted it. In any case, it was useless against an armour-piercing weapon. He fired, once, and the Tsar’s head exploded.

“Round up his people,” he ordered, lifting his radio. “Report.”

“We hold the radio transmitters,” one voice said.

“We hold the noblemen here,” another said. “They’re all really mad at us.”

Petrovich smiled. “Kill them all,” he ordered. “Once that’s done, report back to the palace. We have a country to seize.”

“That might have been a little hasty,” Stefan said. Petrovich had taken a lesson out of Stalin’s playbook; he’d killed or had killed most of the people in Moscow who might have resisted his rule. “The others will feel threatened now.”

“Fuck them,” Petrovich said. The nobles could rant and rave all they wanted to. He controlled the modified army...and none of them could stand against him. “And how are they taking it?”

Stefan frowned. “The network” – referring to the Court Jews at the noble estates – “hasn’t yet had time to find out,” he said. “The news is still spreading across Russia.”

“Good,” Petrovich said. He smiled inwardly; it was *his* turn to build a new Russia. “One of them will rebel, I think, and we’ll make an example of him.”

“Yes, Majesty,” Stefan said. Petrovich blinked. “You are the Tsar now,” Stefan gently reminded him.

“I suppose I am,” Petrovich said. It all suddenly felt real to him. “Contact whoever is in charge of diplomacy,” he said. “I want to confirm the agreement with the French, and then to make a new one with Britain. We shall end this way before it destroys us.”

“Yes, Majesty,” Stefan said. “And does Your Majesty have any other orders?”

Petrovich looked up sharply, and then remembered. The Tsars had enjoyed watching people grovel. “Just don’t crawl,” he said. “Don’t crawl to me.”

Captain Yakov smiled as Stefan left. “I think he’s scared of you,” he said. “That man keeps trying to work with everyone.”

“Hard to blame him,” Petrovich said. He sighed. “Do you remember when we were just preparing for possible operations against China, as part of a diplomatic attempt to build our prestige?”

Captain Yakov smiled. “Yes, of course,” he said. “Now...we have to rebuild Russia, and do it without losing control over the country.”

Petrovich smiled. “I always thought that it could have been done,” he said. “If Stalin could do it, then so too can I.”

He looked up as Rebecca entered. “Please, see to cataloguing the bodies from the American ship,” he said. Captain Yakov smiled and left the room. “Rebecca,” Petrovich said. “I told you I could do it.”

Rebecca threw herself into his arms. “I never doubted it,” she said. “I always knew that you would be great.”

Petrovich felt her warm body under his hands and knew that it had all been worth it. He smiled to himself; taking power in Imperial Russia was the easy bit.

Keeping it, now...

Chapter Forty-Eight: Blessed be the Peacemakers

Ten Downing Street

London, United Kingdom (TimeLine B)

The negotiations for a local ceasefire had taken longer than Prime Minister Lord Harriman Grey would have expected, largely because of the British demand that the French forces on the English mainland surrender without making any further promises. After a final agreement that the troops would be repatriated to France as soon as possible – which was in fact occurring at the moment – the French had agreed. A number of officers, including their commander, and some soldier accused of wartime atrocities would remain, but on the whole the French had been good about punishing atrocities.

The men facing the Prime Minister, Grey was amused to discover, didn't look like much. He had expected a French nobleman, dressed in the outrageous outfits common to the French Court, and a gloomy Russian nobleman. The French Prime Minister was dressed in a stylish, but simple suit, and the Russian – one of their Court Jews – was dressed in a very sober suit.

The French Prime Minister, Vincent Pelletier, spoke first. It had been difficult to convince all three powers – including the Imperial Parliament – to allow the meeting. Grey had burnt up a lot of his political capital to convince everyone that the meeting was in their best interests – and only the open support of the King-Emperor had made it possible. As it was, Parliament would have to support whatever treaty they drew up – or else the war would go on endlessly.

“Allow me to be blunt,” Pelletier said, and Grey nodded. “We have just fought the most brutal war in the history of the world.”

Grey inclined his head. The thousands dead on both sides. The loss of nearly eighty superdreadnaughts from the Home Fleet. The loss of the carriers from both sides. The devastation at Panama...the list went on and on. It had to end, he'd decided; whatever the cost.

“At the same time, none of us has a decisive advantage,” Pelletier continued. “You may have the *Washington* – and our ship has sunk below the waves – but the *Washington* is running short on weapons of its own. We are in a race to mass-produce weapons; land ironclads, carriers, new fighters...even atomic weapons,

and the war will go on. I would venture to comment that it would go on for years yet; even atomic weapons will not prove decisive.

“Each of us has virtually unlimited manpower,” he said. Grey sighed. “Each of us has the industry to equip vast armies. Your Home Fleet can be rebuilt within a few years, should you be willing to do so, and we too could rebuild our carriers. In effect, you might be able to conquer New Spain, like you have Alaska, but how long would it be before we came into India through Iran, or convinced the Prussians to join us, or...”

He paused. “We have never fought a major war between ourselves for years, unless you count the Afghanistan War,” he said. “How long can we fight this war before our empires collapse? We have the lessons of the other timeline to show us what happened to smaller empires; how long will it be for us? Ten years of constant war? Twenty years? Perhaps the war will go on forever!

“I have been ordered by the Emperor to negotiate a peace,” he concluded. “I assume that you have similar orders.”

He nodded to the Court Jew, who had been introduced as Stefan. His English was perfect, without even a trace of an accent. “The new Tsar, one of the people who have come to us from the far side of the looking glass, has offered a local peace deal to France, along the lines of the one proposed by the late Crown Prince. A similar deal is needed for Britain.”

He paused to allow Grey a moment to work that out. Britain would face both France and Russia, although perhaps the two sides would not be in alliance. The war would be a great deal harder to *fight*, let alone to *win*. However, there were other concerns here.

“China will still represent a bone of contention,” he said. “Are we to allow them to settle their disputes without further intervention, divide the country up between ourselves...or what?”

“I fear that no intervention is not too likely,” Pelletier said wryly. “Perhaps a division would be better.”

Grey nodded. “We can set that aside for the moment,” he said. “Perhaps a commission...” He waited for them to nod. “However, there are other concerns here, as I said. You have wantonly attacked Britain itself, and done so during a time of peace talks.”

Pelletier lowered his eyes. “The situation...was confused,” he said. “The Emperor collapsed before any terms could be finalised and the Crown Prince decided that he wanted to assert his authority.”

Grey shrugged. The reports from the Paris Court had been along similar lines. “Even so, your forces have caused a great deal of damage, including nearly two hundred thousand deaths in Home Fleet...”

“And you killed thousands when you attacked Panama,” Pelletier pointed out. “You killed thousands when you struck at the carriers and the *Charles de Gaulle*. The slave revolts in Cuba cost thousands of lives...”

“You exaggerate,” Grey said. “You have also caused a great deal of damage to Britain itself...”

“And you have done the same to France, through air-bombing raids and even a bombardment from a battleship,” Pelletier pointed out.

Stefan smiled. “If we’re tossing atrocities around, what about Sevastopol, or even Alaska?”

Grey laughed wryly. “Very well,” he said. He looked over at Pelletier for a long moment. “Allow me to be blunt – again,” he said. “We are not happy with you.” Pelletier snorted. “At the same time, fighting the war to a finish will be difficult. Here, therefore, are our terms for peace.

“Cuba and the rest of the occupied Caribbean islands go to us,” he said. “We won’t make any claims to New Spain, but we want a fifty-mile demilitarised zone within New Spain, running south from the border line.” He waited for a reaction; none was forthcoming. “We want free passage through both the Panama Canal and the Suez Canal, and we want the Philippines. We care very little for China; you can have your possessions there or leave them, as you wish.”

He paused. “We also want that French commander from the other reality,” he said.

“That might be tricky,” Pelletier admitted. “The man is in a coma.”

Grey shrugged. “I dare say we’ll live,” he said. He hoped that he’d struck the balance between punishing the French, therefore pleasing his own people, and allowing the French to save face, therefore preventing a third Global War. “What

about the other terms?”

Pelletier looked at him for a long moment. Grey wished, not for the first time, that he could read minds. “We find those terms acceptable, subject to some modification,” he said. Grey lifted an inviting eyebrow. “First, we would like to keep the right to send bishops to the Philippines and Quebec, ministering to the souls of the Catholics there. Second, we would like to keep free trade there, and of course if some of the people want to keep their French citizenship, that they should be allowed to do so. Finally, we want to keep a naval base there.”

“If,” Grey commented, patriotism convincing him that no one would want to keep the French citizenship if they could have a British citizenship. “I believe that they will agree to everything, but the naval base,” he said.

“I think we can do without that, then,” Pelletier said, and smiled. “Everything else?”

“I’ll have a scribe draw up the terms, then,” Grey said. “Once we have a temporary agreement, we can send it back to our lords and masters.” He paused. “Now, for Russia.” Stefan smiled grimly. “We want to keep Alaska and we want you to join the commission to divide China,” Grey said. “There’s nothing else that we really want from you.”

“I shall so inform the Tsar,” Stefan said. “I do not believe that he will refuse.”

“One detail, though,” Grey said. “It is my understanding that you have at least one American ship from the other timeline. We want the crew back.”

Stefan shook his head. “None of the crew survived the cold,” he said. “Unlike the *Washington* or the other ship, the three ships that we had landed on land. By the time we found them, nearly all of them were dead of cold, even the Russians.”

Grey knew that Jackson had guessed that much, just from what they’d seen. A competent American crew could have taken the Abrams to Paris...and nothing could have stopped them. The incompetent, almost tentative, use of the tanks had been very revealing.

“We have brought the bodies, though,” Stefan said. “Unfortunately, the rest of the fleet could be out there, and we’d never know about it.”

Grey nodded. The vast frozen north of Russia could have concealed all of Task

Force INDIA for years. “Thank you for that,” he said. “We’ll make arrangements for them to be delivered to Admiral Jackson for burial.” He looked around the room. “Are we all agreed on the preliminary terms?”

“Yes,” Pelletier said flatly. “While there are other matters I need to discuss with you, none of them have any bearing on the peace conference. An atomic agreement, for example; it’s not in any of our interests to allow the smaller states that sort of power.”

Grey suddenly felt very tired. “We’ll discuss that later,” he said. Joint action would do a great deal to repair relations between the superpowers. “Until later, then; gentlemen.”

Admiral Jackson felt more than a little ridiculous in his aristocratic uniform, even though there was no longer any Congress to ratify his sudden elevation to the peerage. Being created Baron George Washington, something that Anderson had assured him was not unusual with Royal Navy commanders, had been a surprise. Anderson himself, unfortunately, couldn’t be Baron Amherst; there already was an Amherst family.

He wasn’t sure what to make of the British Prime Minister. He seemed more determined than either Tony Blair or John Major had been, both of whom he’d met on deployments. He also had arrogance, something that had been bred out of British Prime Ministers, something that reminded him of the old joke about Henry Kissinger. According to the joke, he’d told President Reagan that America had a sphere of interest in which its interests were paramount, and then he’d pointed to a globe and said that *that* was the United State’s sphere of influence.

“Congratulation on your elevation,” Grey said. He sounded tired, but happy. “What do you think of the peace terms?”

Jackson paused to read the short document quickly. He had no doubt that by the time the protocol experts got finished with it; it would be a great deal longer. By the time he had finished, he was mildly astonished – and not a little annoyed.

“That’s all?” He demanded. “Where’s the punishment for killing members of my crew?”

Grey glared at him for a long moment, then sighed. “What terms would you have

us ask for?” He asked. “All of New Spain?”

“What about the survivors from the *Charles de Gaulle*?” Jackson demanded. “What about those who remain in Russia. They’re dangerous; why not demand that they be handed over to us?”

Grey sighed again. “Captain, Admiral, Baron; listen to me,” he said. “The French Empire is a *fact*; it cannot be wiped away. For us to occupy New Spain alone, Admiral, would be a serious strain on our resources, and we could not take that strain. To reduce the French Empire to ruins would take so much time and blood that our empire would not survive the effort.”

He paused for a long moment. “We cannot back them into a corner,” he snapped. “We cannot force them to remain subordinate to us forever. If we try to take what little remains of the *Charles de Gaulle*, they will be subordinate to us – and because they’re smart enough to see that, they will refuse any such demand. The war will go on...and wars are chancy things. Who knows who will get atomics first, Admiral; can you guarantee that they won’t get them?”

He paced around his office. “If you hadn’t come, the war would have lasted forever,” he snapped. “Your histories tell us this much – crushing someone into the ground is a recipe for future trouble. I won’t have that, I can’t! Peace, Admiral; peace is what we need!”

Jackson took a calming breath. It wasn’t the time for an argument, but there were things that needed to be said. “But at what price?”

Grey scowled at him. “We won the war, Admiral; now we have to win the peace.” He tapped the peace terms. “We’ll get this, Admiral, and then we’ll get into the stars. A long war is in no one’s interests.”

Pelletier knew perfectly well that the British could have intercepted the telephone link between Paris and London, or cut it at any moment for that matter. The taboo on harming the cables had held strong, however, and they’d been untouched. It would have been ironic if they’d been broken through disuse, but no; they worked perfectly.

“Those are the peace terms, sire,” he said, after reading them out. He knew that the Russian Court Jew would be explaining them to his Tsar at the same time. It

wasn't something he envied him; the new Tsar could afford to show no signs of weakness. "What do you think?"

There was a long pause. "That's not as bad as I had feared," the Emperor said, after a long moment. "Videzun remains out of it, by the way. He's just lying in a coma on his bed."

Pelletier shrugged. He'd argued for simply ending Videzun's life, but the Emperor had disagreed. "A pity," he said, and the Emperor snorted. "What about Jasmine?"

"Oh, she's still upset," the Emperor said. His tone was more than a little guilty. "Now...what do you recommend?"

Pelletier dropped into the formal phasing. "I recommend acceptance," he said. "Sire; I don't think that we could get better terms by continuing the war."

"No, I don't think so," the Emperor agreed. "Very well; tell the British that we accept. The Russians, at least, have proven their willingness to return to the status quo."

Pelletier smiled. The Russians could have been very difficult and ruined everything. "That's a relief, sire," he said. "I'll sign the preliminary documents now."

"I'll have to make some arrangements for the Philippines," the Emperor said. "Fortunately, the Viceroy was killed in a bombing raid; idiot was going to return home and the British or the Russians sunk his ship."

Pelletier shook his head. "So many thousands gone," he said, thinking of all those who had died for their leaders. "Thank you, sire."

After exchanging the ritual farewells, Pelletier left the room, asking the guard to lead him back to the conference chamber. The Emperor's permission made him feel light-headed; finally he could put an end to the war. Grey bowed to him as he entered, taking his seat. Stefan turned up a few minutes later, looking relieved.

"The Emperor has confirmed the peace terms," Pelletier said, without preliminaries. "I have his permission to ink them now, if you are willing."

"The Tsar has agreed as well," Stefan said. His voice was quiet and gloomy.

Grey nodded his head slowly. "There was some dissent within the Imperial Parliament," he said. "However, the treaty will pass, even though it may cost Prime Minister Lord Roger Adams his job. Not all of the Americans were happy about it, you know."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Pelletier said. He meant it. "People who can do what's right are so few these days."

Grey gave him a sharp look. "There were those who wanted to annex the demilitarised zone," he said. Pelletier nodded grimly; there had been those in the French Empire with unrealistic desires as well. "Shall we sign before something else goes wrong?"

"I think that that would be a very good idea," Pelletier said. Grey produced a single sheet of parchment, and then produced three more. One for Britain, one for Russia, one for France, and then one for the record books. Grey signed the first one with a flourish and then passed it on; Pelletier read it carefully, mentally translating the English into French and then comparing it with the French on the paper. Everything seemed fine.

"There," he said, signing it. He repeated the motion on the other three documents, watching as Stefan checked them all before signing them himself. "Now, which one is mine?"

Grey blinked owlishly at him. Pelletier couldn't tell if he was amused, shocked, insulted or a combination of the three. "They are all the same," he said dryly. "Take any one you like."

Pelletier picked up a single sheet, checked that it had all three signatures, and then solemnly shook hands with both of the other two men. They all smiled at one another, finally feeling years of tension falling from their shoulders, perhaps for a very long time...and perhaps for forever.

The Second Global War was over.

Chapter Forty-Nine: Wedding Nights

Springfield USA

Nr New Orleans, North American Union (TimeLine B)

As a flight of F-18s passed overhead, trailing red, blue and white smoke behind them, the USS *George Washington* finally entered the Gulf of Mexico, passing countless boats from New Orleans and even a couple of French ships. Captain Morrigan watched them with concern, but they seemed as pleased as everyone else that the war was finally over.

“I wonder what will happen to the old girl now,” he commented. “Are all of us going to Cuba?”

Admiral Jackson shrugged. “Not all of us,” he said. “Some of us will be living in Springfield.”

“Yes, *My Lord*,” Morrigan said, his tone slightly mocking. “That baronetcy has gone to your head.”

Jackson smiled at him. “Quite right,” he said. “Now wash my face and shave my beard.”

“Only if you want your throat accidentally brutally cut with a razor,” Morrigan said. “What’s going to happen to the *Washington*?”

Jackson shook his head slowly. “She’s probably going to be in dry dock for a long time,” he said. “The engineers here want to know all about building her, so they can build one like her. There’s already talk of harnessing the atom for peaceful use here, and we’ve given them plans for safer fission plants. They know about oil here, but they want to move directly to nuclear power.”

Morrigan shrugged. “It should be interesting,” he said, as Springfield appeared in the distance. The shoreline wasn’t that impressive, yet, but for a town that had only been in existence for nine months, the growth rate was impressive. New factories, building the world’s first real computers, were springing up – many of them crewed by women and Native Americans. In Cuba, there were already plans to boost the island forward to first-world status within a decade.

He smiled. There was no such thing as the second world here, except perhaps the wilderness backwoods of Russia. Even darkest Africa was well developed, certainly up to the standards of 1860s America; the only place of real misery was China. In a new spirit of companionship, the three superpowers – and Japan – would be doing some work to improve the place.

“Better than anything we ever did,” he muttered. In timeline A, there had been far too many attempts to solve the effects of the problems, but hardly ever the root causes. These people...had never even pretended to accept the concept that there was something wrong with imperialism, with developing countries as part of a global empire.

“Yes, we could have improved Cuba simply by sending in the Marines,” Jackson said, misinterpreting his question. “I’m sorry about the ship.”

Morrigan shrugged. “Give us five years and we’ll be building more,” he said. “Then we shall see what I do.” He smiled. “You’ll be mayor of this little community for a while.”

“With all of the Native Americans coming in to find new hope?” Jackson asked. “It won’t stay little for long.” He paused for a long moment. “Did the security staff do as I asked?”

Morrigan nodded. “Yes, Admiral,” he said. “They found nothing, apart from some really sexy lingerie.”

Jackson laughed. “It doesn’t matter,” he said. “We know who is making those transmissions now.” He let out a heavy sigh. “All we have to do is confront her.”

The Church had been newly built, only two months old, and it was already over-serviced. The ministers for the church had already asked for permission to build a larger one, but for the moment it was the only large church in Springfield. It felt roomy inside, even with nearly five hundred people packed inside.

“You look wonderful,” Sharon said, as Maggie O’Brien twirled in front of her. “Almost good enough to eat.”

“Thank you,” Maggie said. “God, I feel happy and nervous and...”

Sharon smiled at her. “You look fine,” she said. “Where’s the stand-in dad?”

There was a knock at the door. “May I come in?” Sir Joseph asked. Maggie grinned and opened the door. The elderly admiral smiled at her as he considered her. “I am proud to be your father for an hour,” he said.

“Damning with faint praise,” Sharon said. Maggie gave her a sharp look. The last thing her wedding needed was for her to start sniping at Sir Joseph. “He’s right, you know; every tight-fitting trouser is going to be very sore.”

Sir Joseph coughed and made a valiant effort to glare at her. “It’s almost time,” he said. “Are you ready?”

Maggie nodded. The distant noise of the organ struck up; she’d never fully understood why someone had marked it BLOODY STUPID JOHNSTON, as if that was the name of the Chief Engineer who’d designed it. The vicar – for some reason Admiral Jackson hadn’t been too keen on anyone with a higher rank coming to the new town – hadn’t been pleased at all.

“It’s time,” Sir Joseph said. He took her arm gently, nodding to the page to open the door. “Come along.”

Maggie tried hard to keep her face serious as she walked slowly up the exact centre of the church, Sharon carrying her train behind her. She saw Anderson at the end, with Admiral Jackson standing beside him, and felt her heart almost burst from love. He smiled at her and she smiled back.

“Ahem,” the vicar said. She’d wondered if an Admiral would perform the service, but all three of them were involved in one way or another. She smiled; one was the bridegroom, another was the best man, a third was her surrogate father. A tall black man led a line of Captains, standing in salute to their admiral.

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to witness the joining in holy matrimony of two God-fearing Christians, Felix Anderson and Maggie O’Brien,” the vicar said. “If anyone has just cause or impediment to their union, let him speak now, or forever hold his tongue.”

There was a long silent pause. “Marriage is a holy state, conceived by God,” the vicar said. “Maggie O’Brien, do you, of your own free will, take this man, to love, to honour, to cherish, to obey...until death do you part?”

“I do,” Maggie said. Her voice was quiet, but it echoed out around the church. “I do.”

“Baron Falklands, Admiral Felix Anderson,” the vicar said. “Do you, of your own free will, take this woman, to love, to honour, to cherish, to obey...until death do you part?”

Anderson’s voice was softer. “I do,” he said. Only a handful of people heard him. “I do,” he repeated, a little louder.

“Then, by the authority invested in me, in front of the Lord God, I pronounce you man and wife,” the vicar said. “You may now kiss the bride.”

Anderson leaned towards her. Maggie leaned up, opening her lips slightly, and they met. They kissed, deeply, and the church cheered. “I love you,” he whispered, as they kissed again.

“Me too,” she whispered back. “I love you too.”

As soon as he could decently beg off from the ceremony, having eaten a slice of cake in the shape of the *Amherst*, Jackson headed for a small office that had been built near the Church. As soon as he reached the office, he sat down, allowing himself a moment to think, to consider.

For better or worse, he knew, the *Washington* crew had adapted to their new home. Many had remarried, or were going steady with people from the North American Union. Springfield had even had its first scandal, when a Native American – one of the people – had sliced his daughter’s nose off, as punishment for dating an American. Jackson, who felt that tolerance had its limits, had arranged for the man to face twenty years of hard labour.

“You live here, you live by our rules, and in exchange for living by our rules we tolerate you, provided you don’t break the rules,” he’d said at the time. The Prime Minister and the Mayor hadn’t complained; they’d felt that Jackson had been too lenient. The People were permitted to live in peace, provided they stayed on their reservation. In Springfield, how many of the People would find a second chance?

He shook his head slowly. The crew of the *Newport* had been buried in Springfield, as close to their homes as they could have been buried, but where

were the others? The new Tsar, the former Colonel Petrovich, had been right; the remaining ships could be somewhere under the Russian snows, or in the Antarctic, or...in Japan, or the Congo, or...

We'll never know, he thought, and hoped, that, perhaps, it would all reveal itself in time.

He picked up a report and read it absently. Nearly a month after the peace treaty had been signed, everything seemed to be going back to normal, at least for timeline B. Trade between Britain, France and Russia had been resumed and regular trade between New Spain and the North American Union was on the verge of resuming. The Russians were hiring teachers and scientists from the other two superpowers – and trading technology from the ships to pay for it.

Enough, he thought. He knew what he was doing and he hated himself for it. He was putting it off, putting off what he was supposed to be doing. With a muttered oath – *I swear to tell the truth, and nothing but the truth*, his mind gibbered – he picked up his radio, made a short call, and waited.

Twenty minutes later, Lieutenant Sally Woods walked through the door. “Good afternoon, Admiral,” she said. “You wanted to see me?”

Jackson waved her to a chair. “I want to ask you a question, Lieutenant,” Jackson said. “Who are you working for?”

He wasn't sure what he'd been expecting. There was no scream, or dramatic faint; Sally just looked back at him evenly. “I'm sure I don't know what you mean,” she said.

“There have been transmissions coming from your quarters,” Jackson said. “The scientists we have, such as they are seeing the *Washington* is hardly an ocean research ship, cannot identify *how* the transmissions are being made. They rant and rave about non-localised phenomena, whatever the hell that is. Lieutenant; who are you working for?”

Sally said nothing. “I think I can guess,” Jackson said. “You can't be working for the French, or the Chinese; *they* would use radio, or something like it, something that we can understand. I think you're working for the aliens who sent us here.”

Sally lifted an eyebrow. “What put you on to me?” She asked. She was very calm; no panic, no attempt to run, just a single question. “What made you think it was

me?”

“You knew too much,” Jackson said. “Your work was too good. Once we had an idea of the existence of a spy, we worked out that only three or four people had been in the region of the non-localised phenomena when it was present.” He paused. “Which is something of a contradiction in terms, but who cares? You knew too much about the situation – and that should have been impossible.”

“I read a lot of alternate history?” Sally asked mildly. “You might be making a mistake.”

Jackson looked at her for a long moment. “I don’t think I am,” he growled. “Who are you?”

Something seemed to go out of her. “I am Lieutenant Sally Woods,” she said. “I was...recruited, for want of a better term, in the year 2100, in a timeline that’s different again...suffice it to say that the United States covers half of the world.”

Jackson blinked. “Timeline C?”

“Something like that,” Sally said. She sighed. “There was a major temporal disturbance at the time, one originating from inter-Contemporary affairs, and it provided an opportunity for the...well, my people, to invite me to join them.”

“The UFOs that brought us here?” Jackson asked. “Why?”

Sally hesitated. “There are certain things I can tell you,” she admitted. “Imagine that every decision you make has two possible outcomes. Imagine...that something as simple as putting your left sock on instead of your right causes a... bump in time. It doesn’t necessarily create a whole new quantum reality...”

“Why?” Jackson asked. “Is it not a different universe?”

“I’m explaining as best as I can,” Sally said. “The properties of a universe are defined by its quantum structure. If two minutes later both universes are the same, then they *are* the same. Around ninety percent of all decisions cause a bump, rather than a fork in the timeline. Certain decisions, however, can create a whole new universe.”

“Such as General Howe at Long Island,” Jackson said, just to show that he was paying attention. “In our universe, he let Washington escape.”

“Exactly,” Sally said. “What you have to understand is while there are a finite number of timelines, that number is very high indeed. In some of them, a race rises to cosmic power, finally stepping outside their reality into the...call it the Vale; a universe that...”

She paused. “Sorry, I’m not explaining this very well,” she said. “Think of it as spaghetti in tomato sauce; each timeline is a bit of spaghetti, while the Vale is the sauce. If you enter the Vale, you can re-enter any timeline *at* any possible point along it, while at the same time you are immune to any changes in your own timeline. In effect, you have entire universes to study and explore.”

Jackson frowned. “And change?”

“Oh yes,” Sally said. “Now pay attention, because this is the important bit. My employers are not the only race ever to penetrate the Vale. Very few races manage to do that; they either stagnate, transcend, or destroy themselves or get destroyed. One other race that managed that...well, they’re not very nice. We call them the Enemy, because we don’t know what they are or where they came from. We suspect that they’re none the wiser about us.

“Anyway, the Enemy started manipulating history across various timelines, doing it in ways to diminish that timeline without creating alternate realities. They... want one outcome of the timelines, and one of the things they want from their ideal is a weak humanity. Humans are important; in various timelines humans become very important within the galactic community that’s out there. My employers...got involved in countering their actions, and the war began.

“And, because of quantum states again, any...extra-Contemporary interference causes some...distortion in the timeline,” she said. “If the Enemy learned that we had a base operating in this reality” – she grinned suddenly – “around the planets of a star you’ve never heard of, they might intervene directly and destroy the star. We would be compelled to retaliate; there have been entire galaxies caught up in a war few of their population could even perceive – and destroyed.

“So my employers work through agents, like me,” she concluded. “This reality needed a kick in the pants, something to help it get ready for the future...and your people, Admiral, are that kick in the pants. The UFOs...were just a light show, something for your people; the transfer was effected by other agents.”

Jackson felt his mind reel. He fixed on one question. “Why are you telling me all this?” He asked. “Why...have you made that choice?”

“I’m an observer, normally,” Sally said. She seemed...more urgent; she’d almost grown up in front of him as she spoke. “How can I observe if everyone knows who I am?”

“But if we’re here, then won’t there be...distortion?” Jackson asked. “Just by being here, aren’t we attracting attention?”

“Not as much as you might think,” Sally said. “You’re very tiny on a cosmic scale. My employers...have a sense of fairness, for want of a better word; if someone finds a Time Agent, they get some explanation.”

She smiled at him. Jackson stared at her. “What about the other agents, the other ships?” He asked. “Do they all have agents?”

“If I knew, I wouldn’t tell you,” she said. “If the Enemy does look at this reality, they will be looking for their enemies first, people like me. If you knew where to find one, they might try to take the knowledge from you. Do not be tricked by my appearance, Admiral; the Enemy could read anything from your mind, if they decided that they could risk unleashing bursts of Psi radiation on this world.” She shuddered. “One of their attacks on human history was to introduce a small degree of active telepathy to a number of small children; defeating that was difficult. By the time we caught on and got involved, they were...controlling entire nations of your planet.

“As for the other ships in your force, I dare say they’ll turn up sooner or later,” she said. She stood up. “Admiral, it’s been a pleasure serving with you.”

“You are not going anywhere,” Jackson said. “In fact...”

“You disappoint me, Admiral,” she said. “Goodbye.”

Jackson stood up...and she vanished in a brilliant flash of light. Jackson swore under his breath, hoping that the recorder had caught all that. The last thing he needed was for Captain Morrigan to relieve him on the grounds of mental instability. He checked once and smiled; the entire event had been recorded. He tapped buttons quickly, dumping all of the information to the *George Washington*, and wandered outside. Time itself seemed to have changed; it was dark and all the stars were coming out.

Admiral Jackson stood on his porch, staring into the sky, and wondering.

The house was simple, one designed for a small family; one large living room, one kitchen, one large bedroom and two smaller ones. It had been a gift from the government, an acknowledgement of the new Baron in the New Orleans region. As Maggie made to enter her new house, Anderson stopped her and picked her up, carrying her across the threshold.

“Like it?” Anderson asked, as he put her down in the living room. “Is it good?”

Maggie held him close to her. She was nervous...and curiously excited. “Yes,” she said, “it’s wonderful.”

She turned to kiss him and found his lips coming to meet hers. Her entire body was on fire, his hands roaming over every one of her curves. It required a massive effort to undress without tearing anything. She slipped out of her clothes and found that he too was naked and coming for her and...

Afterwards, they lay together on the couch, holding each other. There was no longer any war, there was no longer any need to pretend that they didn’t have feelings for one another. Maggie smiled, feeling like a woman for the first time in ages; it really had been very good indeed.

Anderson had drifted off to sleep in her arms. “I love you,” she whispered, and meant it. Was there any other point to the universe than that?

Epilogue

In a place that wasn't a place...

In a time where no time passes...

Two figures stood together, watching the timeline flow by.

"Our agent has returned to our base," the first figure said. "All proceeds as expected."

The second figure snorted. "It has not," she said. "We cannot predict basic human reactions. They have their peace again. They will soon return to their peaceful ways, changing nothing, challenging nothing. What will happen when the wave sweeps across this universe, bringing...death to all who cannot resist?"

The first figure smiled. "Their world will move onto the right path," he said. "They do not need to waste resources on...uplifting parts of their world, do they? They have been reminded of their vulnerability – and some of them know that we exist."

"There will be massive upheaval," the second figure said. "There will be a hunt for our agents. The social-political indicators..."

"They will find none," the first figure said. "We permitted them a glimpse of what's at stake; an ongoing push to force them further forward. Such is permitted, is it not?" The second figure said nothing. "Of the leading newcomers, one is a ruler, one is in a position of considerable influence...and one is in a coma." There was a flicker of humour. "You can't win them all."

"Free will," the second figure said. She made the word a curse. "There must always be free will?"

The first figure gave a mental impression of a shrug. "We cannot force attempts too far, for that will set off quantum interference," he said. "We gambled enough with the second intrusion. We could not direct; only one of our agents is in a position to direct anything. There must be free will."

The mind-tone was mildly ironic. The second figure didn't react. "This is a dangerous game," she said. "This part of the cosmos has remained free of the

War. Your actions will make it a warzone.”

“Perhaps,” the first figure said. They stood together, gazing down at the spinning paths of time. “Perhaps not, not until it’s too late.”

The second figure radiated alarm. “The Enemy might decide to attempt an ultimate sanction,” she said. Her gaze slipped down to the universe. “They might attempt to destroy it all!”

The first figure didn’t answer. What did such an entity see when it – he – contemplated the universe? All things would be revealed, in time.

THE END

Afterword

The American Revolution was a comedy of errors from start to finish. From the mistakes that led up to Lexington, to the disastrous Battle of Saratoga, the unwillingness to use the best commanders on either side, to the failures of both sides to turn their advantages into war-winning successes...both sides blundered so badly that it is rather amazing that neither one sought to reach a sincere accommodation with their opponents and fellow countrymen.

Of all of the potential Points of Divergences within the war, none are as astonishing as the Battle of Long Island, sometimes referred to as the Revolution's Dunkirk. It has to be visualised to be understood; the largest American army, under the command of George Washington, trapped by the British Army, under the command of General Howe. Howe was not known for hurrying, as many historians have noted, but in this case...why did he have to? He had Washington right where he wanted him.

A single determined attack could have broken the American Army. A single ship in the water could have prevented the daring night-time escape of the entire army. Washington, almost untested, rose to the occasion magnificently, arranging a very stealthy and silent evacuation of the *entire* American Army. When the sun rose the next day...the British found that the Americans had literally vanished under their noses.

But...what if...Howe had taken the army prisoner?

Washington's army was the only major combat force on the American side. Without it, the British could have swept up to Philadelphia – the seat of the Congress – very quickly. Could whoever held Washington's position after his capture – Arnold? Gates? – have rallied the Americans again? Would the individual colonies have been willing to continue to fight as part of a losing side? No one likes a loser, after all, and everyone wants to be on the winning side...

Carrier Wars grew out of that idea, the concept of a quick end to the American Revolution. The existence and success of the American Revolution literally changed its world; what would the effects have been if it had been avoided or if it ended quickly? Would the French Monarchy, which had spent so much money supporting the Americans in the original timeline, survive with that extra money?

Might Napoleon, rather than joining the French Revolution, have joined Louis instead? Would he have risen to a position of power, perhaps enough to have reformed the empire, rather than it collapsing under the weight of its internal problems? Would the absence of those years of turmoil mean that France would dominate Europe? Without the Napoleonic Invasion of 1812, would the Russians ever seek to reform themselves?

That idea grew into the seeds of a world. Technology, of course, would develop slower with fewer parties in the game. The German Empire, of course, would not exist; France or Russia would have crushed Prussia in the wake of settling old scores. America pushed forward development...and without it, there would be little need for such development. Technology would advance, of course, but there would be more time to play with each new development – what would Africa look like if the early explorers needed to build railways, instead of aircraft coming along during the later parts of the Scramble for Africa?

Such a world would be profoundly conservative. Slavery would probably exist longer in the British Empire, as the south of America would have a voice in such affairs, but at the same time the basic solution could have been applied in America – purchasing slaves through public subscription. Would that, in the end, have been less painful than the American Civil War? Racism, too, would have to fade, if not vanish, because of India; the Indians have to have a stake in the Empire, or they might rebel.

In many ways, it's a better world than ours...

The entire concept of the Multiverse Time War is something I came up with for *Second Chance*. I have occasionally been frustrated when a book – such as the *Island in the Sea of Time*, *Dies the Fire* books – puts forward an event without explaining why the event happened. I left the Britain ISOT unexplained; so it got worked into *Carrier Wars*. From the point of view of those who observe, the world of *Carrier Wars* – TimeLine B – needs a kick in the butt...which, of course, the mysterious Enemy cannot allow...

But that's getting ahead of myself. I started to wonder about what could be done to alter the universe, and of course I decided that they needed an *American* carrier from our timeline – it was originally intended to be the *Eisenhower*, and then it occurred to me that there would be more tension with the *Washington* – and a

French carrier; one that would balance affairs. I decided that the Russians wouldn't *want* a carrier...so they got some troopships instead.

In our world, change affects everyone. What would happen if a society like the United Empire learnt about our world – and about some of the science there? I took that thought, and ran with it, and...well, that's what you're holding in your hand, or staring at on your computer screen, or whatever.

The universe of *Carrier Wars* will return...in some universe. Perhaps even this one.

Christopher G. Nuttall

Edinburgh - 23/04/06

Appendix: A Short History of the North American Union

The defeat and capture of General Washington, along with most of his army, at Long Island doomed the cause of the American Revolution, or the American Insurgency as it became known in British circles. While General Howe still procrastinated from marching on Philadelphia – apparently, he thought that the rebels would be open to negotiation – Congress was practically torn apart by internal strife.

One group, led by Adams, believed that the fight wasn't over and the Colonies should continue the war. The second group, more or less led by Franklin, calculated that the war was effectively lost, simply because the loss of the army had scared many of the individual colonies from further rebellious activity. Of the prominent Rebel generals, Gates favoured talking, while Arnold, while still willing to fight, did not hold out much hope for success.

As British troops carefully occupied the remaining cities and towns within the Colonies, the rebellion simply came apart. With most of the states surrendering, it was child's play to round up the rebels and hand them over to Howe, who – insanely – promptly began negotiating with them. That was the final straw for Lord North, who had already decided that Lord Jeffery Amherst, who had been commander of North America during the Seven Years War, would become the first American Viceroy.

In many ways, Amherst was a truly brilliant choice for the role. He knew many of the players on both sides of the Rebellion and – unlike many British officers – commanded genuine respect from American officers and politicians. With an American wife and a wide remit for action, Amherst set to work, building the new system of American governance.

The first step was to offer amnesty to those who had taken part in the rebellion, provided that they swore loyalty to the King. Although Amherst himself never put it this way, it was intended as a way to make ongoing minor trouble simply go away. A number of rebels, including Franklin and Arnold, accepted the offer, forever splitting the rebels. Washington himself returned to his plantation and never re-entered politics.

The second step was to 'clarify' the relations between Britain, America and the people. Amherst arranged for committees, aided by Franklin, to set up what were in effect local Parliaments – including an American-styled House of Lords – to

perform most of the running of the country. Issues such as taxation and funding the army – British troops in America were to be paid by American Parliaments until 1790 – were placed in their hands.

Ironically, Amherst had a stroke of luck, when a log cabin with three women was attacked by Indians, the men of the house having been away at the time. Their capture, rape, scalping and murder fired rage all across America – something that ended the debate over just who should pay for the occupation force. The Indian War of 1780 saw almost all of the restrictions on continued settlement lifted, spearheading a rush into Indian lands.

The final confirmation from King George III of Amherst's great work came in 1790, the same year when American MPs took their place within Westminster. America continued to grow slowly, but steadily until the First Global War broke out in 1812, where war was swiftly declared and greeted with wild jubilation across America. In what everyone agreed was a brilliant campaign, General Arnold launched a land campaign into Louisiana, which was Spanish territory at the time, invading and capturing New Orleans without much difficulty.

Viceroy Amherst attempted to restrain the American Parliaments, which were becoming more jingoistic by the minute, from attempting to snatch Mexico as well. Arnold – and his ally Admiral Nelson – managed to launch the offensive, which took Texas...and then ran into trouble in 1816. Although Arnold managed to escape with most of his army from a French trap, French control over New Spain was confirmed. In the peace talks of 1820, the same year that Amherst died, the border between New Spain and British America was finally settled.

Little of note, apart from ongoing Indian Wars, occurred between 1820 and 1850. In 1850, however, the system of government for British North America was on the verge of breaking down. Amherst had never expected to see such a vast empire on the land, and the attempts to handle Indian, Spanish and Quebecois made the system difficult to control – by anyone. Adding to the confusion was the exact role of the American MPs at Westminster; they tended to vote Parliamentary, but Parliament had little direct authority over America.

The massive reshuffle of British North America in 1850 created the North American Union, and gave birth to both the American Parliament and the Imperial Parliament. The American Parliament very rapidly discovered that it was not isolated from the Slavery Dispute, which was reaching its height in 1852. There were over 100'000 slaves in the NAU – and the campaign against slavery was

reaching new levels of awareness. In line with the British Parliament, the NAU banned slave trading (although not owning slaves) in 1853, and established the Freedom Fund to purchase slaves and free them. Within ten years, there were thousands of small farms run by blacks, mainly within the old south.

The development of modern industry, including railways, made slavery more and more uneconomic, particularly with the falling number of slaves. The NAU Parliament, in 1882, freed the remaining slaves, falling in line with the rest of the United Empire, except for South Africa. The crusade of the Freedom Fund, which believed in 'uplifting' the blacks and Africans to 'civilisation,' was at odds with the Afrikaner belief that blacks were inherently inferior. In 1883, they revolted against the British Empire, eventually being crushed in 1890. The NAU took part in the United Empire force sent to put the rebellion down.

The North American Union, like the rest of the United Empire, felt the shivers of revolution and class war in the aftermath of the South African War. The United Empire went through yet another reformation, finally adopting the concept of universal suffrage and local home rule for everywhere. In the NAU, among other things, Parliament finally voted to create the reservation for the People – the survivors from the Native Americans – and basically ignored them past that. Noting diplomatic rumblings from Russia – which might have had something to do with Russian cuisine – the NAU offered to purchase Alaska, offering a great deal of money for it. In this way, the NAU helped to start the ball rolling towards the Second Global War, which broke out over China in 2008.

The NAU was enthusiastic about the war as anyone, at first. The Parliament had long eyed Alaska and sending several regiments of the Militia to conquer the land, while the regular army engaged in New Spain, seemed an excellent idea. No one, however, was prepared for the savagery of modern war and the development of new technology, which led to stalemates on all fronts. By 2009, everyone was sick of the war...and no one was determined enough to make a step towards peace.

It was at that point that the French Empire conquered the Falkland Islands, and Vice-Admiral Felix Anderson, Royal North American Navy, was ordered to recover them. No one expected what he found down there...

Appendix: The Bourbon (French) Empire

The Bourbon Empire is the formal title of the empire. Despite that, it is effectively a French Empire, run and ruled by Frenchmen. Only New Spain, with a large Spanish majority, is ruled by a Spaniard; Viceroy Cortez. New Spain has a hereditary Viceroy, which passes through the Cortez family, although it is politically subordinate to the Emperor.

Politically speaking, the Bourbon Empire can best be deemed as an aristocratic democracy. All power remains within the Royal Court, except some limited Taxation powers, which belong to the Legislature. The Legislature – effectively a Parliament elected by all men who earn money (therefore not women, non-citizens and bond servants) – has the power to impeach particularly annoying noblemen (a catch-all term for the aristocrats), although the Emperor must support the motion, and the power to tax the non-earning public.

Although the Legislature has no formal power over foreign affairs, and only limited power within the internal sphere, by refusing to vote taxes the Legislature can provide a break on any policy they don't like.

The real power centre of the Empire, however, is the Bourbon Family; a giant family comprised of all the aristocrats of Europe, the ones absorbed into the family through a system of arranged marriages under Prime Minister Napoleon, who was largely responsible for the reformatations that enabled the French Empire to survive and prosper. The family, which has mingled so much that it is probably guilty of incest, is divided into three sections; the direct line of descent from Louis the Great, the remains of the formal nobility (which have hardly any real power and only a stipend to live on from the Emperor) and the co-opted businessmen and politicians. It is, in effect, one vast tribe rather than a traditional family.

Power is sharply divided within the family, although the Emperor is by far the most powerful. Although it is difficult to generalise, it can be described as the more powerful and capable a noble is, the more influence he has. Businessmen, particularly self-made businessmen, are very powerful indeed; the remains of the Prussian Princes are in effect living on the Emperor's charity.

The day-to-day running of the Empire is done by the Civil Service, which handles all matters and reports directly to the Emperor. The Emperor must choose a particular civil servant to serve as his Prime Minister and trusted advisor – no one else gets a say in the matter.

To enter the Bourbon Family, a man (women do not get to join through any other means, but being born into the family) must marry a Lady of the Court, which is a catchall title for any woman born within the family. By marrying her, he takes on her title and social rank, as well as the respect due to such old blood. Such marriages are normally arranged by the Court to bring into the family people who have shown exceptional ability, matching men and women up to grant the right degree of social rank. It is not actually necessary for the man to be faithful- and vice versa – to his wife; the formal wedding is merely a matter of mingling the imaginary blood ties. It is generally assumed that a pregnant Lady of the Court has become pregnant by her husband. An unmarried Lady becoming pregnant is a MAJOR disgrace.

(For reasons of state, from time to time a child is given away in an arranged marriage. This is considered perfectly normal, although the man is expected to continue to treat her as a child until she grows up into a young woman.)

On land, the Bourbon Empire has a fair claim to being the most capable; with a strong system of selecting officers from the ranks. This innovation was introduced by Napoleon, who was heard to remark that every private could become a field marshal. Such officers are generally offered a place in the nobility, leading to the claim that commoners never become officers. The empire follows a strong tradition of Darwinism; officers who lose battles are generally punished for it. Every citizen of the empire is liable for conscription into the army, which is generally colour-blind and treats everyone equally.

By contrast, the Navy is a proud and elite organisation. Historically, the French Navy recruited only from fishermen from the ports, although with the massive pre-war expansion of the navy it was forced to open its decks to newcomers. The major stations of the navy include the Baltic Sea, the Mediterranean Sea (although the Black Sea is supposed to remain disarmed under the Turkish Treaty, Panama (New Spain), Aden and Indochina.

The Bourbon Empire is very strongly Catholic, although the Pope is effectively appointed by the Emperor; misbehaving Popes get tossed out the nearest window. Apart from several tolerated enclaves of Jews within France itself, the Church has been allowed wide latitude in converting the other religions within the Empire, working hard to convert both Muslims from Arabia and Pagans from Africa.

Appendix: The Russian Empire

Of the three superpowers, the Russian Empire is both the most coherent and the most autocratic. Unlike the other two, Russia is effectively ruled directly by the Tsar, working through the Court Jews (effectively a civil service) and the Church. However, in an unusual form, succession runs on a Darwinian system; any noble who tries and succeeds to take the Throne will be accepted as Tsar – until he gets killed by some ambitious rival. If he fails, of course, he is dead. The current Tsar is very unusual, having succeeded his father *and* having held the Throne for far longer than average.

The Russian system is effectively a caste system, divided into serfs, workers, churchmen, soldiers, Court Jews, nobles (*Boyars*) and the Tsar. The serfs work on the farms and are not even considered human by their masters, who have complete rights over them. A serf can be killed by a noble for sport – and no one will complain. As can be imagined, peasant revolts are very common indeed.

Workers, people who work within the factories, have more rights and some freedom, but, by and large, they are every bit as at the mercy of their masters as the serfs. They are generally taught their role by rote, rather than knowing exactly *what* they're doing, and have little chance for advancement. This factor explains Russia's backwardness, compared to the other two powers.

The church plays an important part within the system, acting to repress the serfs. A handful of peasant children who show promise may be sent to the local religious school, where they will be indoctrinated, ordained and sent out to a different village as the local priest and spy for the authorities. Churchmen are permitted to marry, but only with the approval of senior authorities within the Church.

Every serf is liable for conscription into the military (or the navy) at any point, normally through the selection of their local noble. Once they pass through basic training, they are liable to serve at least five to ten years as a common soldier, although soldiers who show real promise are promoted to sergeants. Discipline is extremely harsh, but in compensation soldiers have effectively unlimited access to serf women and raping and pillaging is encouraged while on duty.

The Jewish population of Russia has been effectively co-opted into the *de facto* civil service, the horde of bureaucrats who actually make the system work. Naturally – as anti-Semitism is a fact of life in Russia – they have little choice, but

to be loyal. To be fair, Tsars throughout the years have forbidden pogroms – provided that the Jews remain loyal.

The nobles have almost all of the power in Russia in their collective hands. Under the law, they are allowed to maintain private armies, although none of them can come within two hundred miles of Moscow, without forfeiting their rights, lands and their lives, unless they run really fast. The strongest noble is the Tsar, who controls the army (which will follow whoever is in the Iron Palace), and has to maintain a delicate balance between repressing the nobles (to prevent them from revolting) and over-repressing them (and forcing them to revolt in self-defence).

Women, it should be noted, have very few rights within Russia. Serf women are at the mercy of every man in the village, although their husbands sometimes provide protection. Noblewomen are often given away as presents to friends and would-be allies; one of the highest causes of death within Russia is men being killed by women who can't take it anymore. According to the Church, any woman who disobeys her husband, even for a moment, has been possessed by the devil and must be burned at once.

As a result of all of these factors, the Russian Empire is by far the most backwards of all states, with the possible exception of pre-Collapse China. The recent boost forwards in science, as a result of the war, has gone a long way towards amplifying the unrest within Russia, particularly as the war grinds on with no end in sight...

Appendix: The Origins of the Second Global War

Historians have been arguing about the war ever since it began, having managed to reach a whole series of different conclusions, some of which are contradictory. The basic line of events, however, is clear enough.

In 1910, the Turks (Ottoman Empire) finally collapsed under European pressure, mainly French and Russian. The personal negotiation between the French Emperor and the Russian Tsar produced a division that was considered satisfactory by the two rulers, but not all of their subjects. The most important dissident was the Russian Heir, who became Tsar himself in 1917.

(Both British and French propaganda has claimed that the Heir murdered his father, but there is no real evidence to prove it, one way or the other. What is clear is that both Tsars were exceptionally able, having held the throne for nearly twenty years each.)

Tsar Nicolas was determined to tip the scales of power in Russia's favour, adopting a new aggressive policy towards China, which was the largest non-superpower on the planet – and also the only one bordering Russia that was accessible. Russian meddling in China, which had been held between the three powers since 1850, only made a growing disaster worse, when the Chinese Empire fell.

Although China had avoided being divided up between the three powers, it was kept firmly subordinate by the three powers. The Emperors, and the Mandarins, accepted the situation reluctantly – they could and did squeeze the peasants to provide the danegeld demanded by the powers. Unfortunately, the growing discontent – particularly after Japan intruded onto the scene – led to uprisings, many of which were joined by local forces. The Emperor, the last Emperor of China, tried to hold the Empire together – until he was murdered, apparently on the order of the Tsar.

China disintegrated, therefore, in 1911. The sudden loss of control at the centre convinced warlords out beyond Peking, and outside the powers' easy reach, that they had a chance to take power for themselves. The civil war had begun, featuring a confusing mess of factions, from socialists to nationalists to admirers of the Japanese. By 1927, the war was in full swing, with different warlords being supported by the different powers.

Perhaps the situation could have been defused, but the Tsar was not interested in compromise. In 2003, British forces (mainly from India and Australia) were drawn into the middle of the fighting, attacked by Russian-supported factions. The confusion, and mutual recriminations, started a war fervour, the more confusing because so few people understood what was going on. As the three major powers began rearming, incidents began along all of the borders.

Historians agree, however, that the first major blow of the war – the event that started the entire war – was an attempt by the Russians to seize China in one blow. The sheer size of China defeated the objective (it was suggested later that the Tsar had been misled by the Russian railway network, projecting its capabilities onto China) and the war broke out. This happened, it is important to note, in the middle of a very tense situation all across the world – with clashes occurring on all borders.

By the time the dust had cleared, the three empires were at war with one another.